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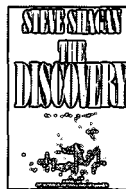
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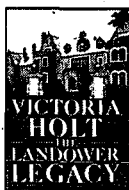
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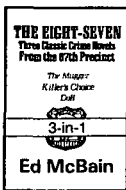
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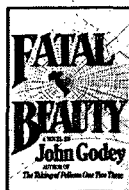
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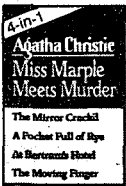
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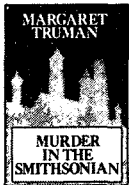
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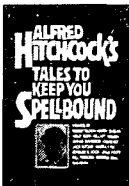
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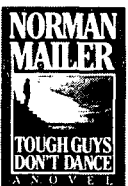
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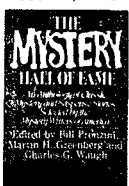
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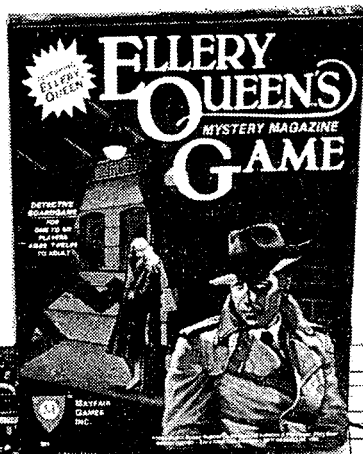
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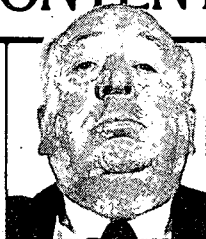
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Once again, it's almost time for Bouchercon, the annual convention of mystery writers and readers, agents and editors. This year's convention takes place in San Francisco at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel on the weekend of October 26th. All mystery buffs are, of course, most welcome.

The three-day program, beginning on Friday, October 25th, will include a variety of panel discussions, the showing of outstanding mystery movies from the past, and a banquet presided over by toastmaster Tony Hillerman.

Those of you who would like to attend should write to:

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In the meantime, we'd like to draw your attention to a special feature in this issue of AHMM,

one that will be continued in the next two issues as well. During the ten years of the television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, several hundred previously published short stories were adapted for use on the shows. Among those were a number that had been published in this magazine in the 1950's and 1960's. And so this fall, with NBC's revival of the series, we thought it would be fun to re-read some of the stories Mr. Hitchcock used. Our first one, in this issue, is by Henry Slesar, long-time mystery writer and the man who contributed the greatest number of tales to the show. "The Deadly Telephone" is one of several televised Slesar stories that first appeared in AHMM, and it's one we particularly enjoyed.

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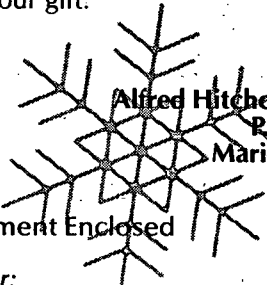


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Final Rites by Doug Allyn



He didn't look much like the law. In his grubby sweatsuit and sneakers he looked more like a Class C high school coach during a losing season. Snoring softly, feet on his cluttered desk, a Detroit Tigers baseball cap tipped forward over his eyes—Norman Rockwell would have loved it. I rapped on the desk.

"Sheriff LeClair? I'm Sergeant Garcia. Lupe Garcia."

One eye blinked open, briefly. "They're not here."

"I haven't told you what I want yet." I eased cautiously

down on a battered office chair upholstered in argyle blanket, wondering why I'd bothered to wear my good suit.

"Algoma's a small town. . . . Garcia, is it? I found a note when I came in this morning said a guy from the Organized Crime Task Force was flying up from Detroit to see me. I take it you're him. I also take it you're here about Roland Costa and his son, since the only thing anybody from Motown wants to talk to me about is them. If I need help on a hot car or a run-away, nobody gives me the time

Illustration by Judy Mitchell

of day. Anyway, they're not here. They were in town a couple of weeks ago to bury Charlie, I haven't seen 'em since."

"I'm not surprised. Neither has anyone else."

He tipped his baseball cap back and looked at me for the first time. We were of an age, but he had more miles on him. A lot more. His eyes were red-rimmed and he looked exhausted.

"Are you saying they've disappeared?"

"They had Charlie brought to Algoma for the funeral," I said, "and that's the last time anybody saw them."

"So they've disappeared," he shrugged. "That's not uncommon for people in their line of work, is it?"

"Did you see them when they were here?"

"Difficult to miss 'em. They were driving a Lincoln limo that must've been a block long. We don't see many cars like that up here in the boondocks."

"Was a woman traveling with them?"

"No woman. Just Roland Costa and Rol Junior. They had a room at the Dewdrop Inn the day of the funeral, and they were alone. Why?"

"Charlie Costa had a girlfriend, Cindy Kessel. She's been talking to the D.A.'s office about buying immunity for herself

with information about Charlie's operations. She's missing, too."

He grunted, massaging his stubbled face with work-roughened paws. I noticed the single gold strand around his right wrist. "Look, I'm afraid I'm not really awake yet," he said. "A little retarded kid wandered away from Camp Algoma yesterday. Found her at sunup this morning, in good shape considering, but I haven't been to bed, and I've gotta wait on a call from the National Guard commander to tell him we won't need any troops for the search. Tell you what, why don't you grab breakfast across the street at Tubby's, and I'll be along as soon as I can."

"If they stayed at a local motel, I could . . ."

"Look, Garcia, this isn't Detroit. This is my town. I said they're not here and they're not. Now maybe we can get a line on 'em, but you're a stranger here so nobody's gonna tell you squat and they might just forget what they do know. So get yourself a cuppa coffee and wait for me, okay? Please?"

"All right, I'll wait a bit. Don't be too long."

"You get homesick you can sit in the supermarket parking lot and sniff the exhaust fumes. I'll be over as soon as I can." He tipped his cap back down and

was asleep before I was out the door.

He was right about one thing at least. Algoma was definitely a small town. A single paved street lined with tacky little shops, supermarket at one end, self-service gas station at the other. Like most northern Michigan towns it had probably been a lumber camp once; God only knew what kept its economy afloat now.

Tubby's had no yogurt, no fresh granola, and no air conditioning. The pale August sunlight beating through the smeared windows made the room considerably warmer than my toast, which wasn't very, and I shed my tie and sportcoat. Passed the time trying to decide whether the place was named after the waitress or the cook. It was a tossup. LeClair came in just as my third glass of iced tea arrived. He'd pinned his badge on his cap.

"Christ," he said, sliding into the red vinyl booth. "My call didn't get through, so about four o'clock I got sixteen National Guardsmen arriving on a wild goose chase, or I should say, *another* wild goose chase, counting yours. Okay, so you wanna fill me in?" The waitress brought him coffee in a mug with a chip out of it, and he nodded his thanks.

"I already have," I said. "They

came here. They apparently never came back. That's really all we know."

"So what brings you all the way up here? You got a warrant for 'em or anything?"

"No, but if I can find the girl, we may just get a shot at them. We know they're into shylocking and narcotics, but they're very cautious people. Without the girl . . . anyway, it's fairly basic police procedure to keep track of the bad guys."

"No kidding? Gosh, I wish I had something to take notes on. You see, I usually wait till folks do something illegal, and then I arrest 'em. Pretty unsophisticated, I guess."

"Why did they bring Charlie all the way up here to be buried?"

"Roland and Charlie grew up here. Their old man was a bootlegger back in the thirties, or so I'm told. After Prohibition he moved on to bigger things in Detroit, but the family still has a good-sized cottage on the river. They come up for a month or so in the summer, and sometimes during hunting season."

"You know them then? Personally, I mean."

"Yeah," he said, sipping his coffee, "I've known 'em since I was a kid, and everybody else in this town, too. So?"

"So nothing. I was just asking. Look, have you got some

kind of a complex about being from the sticks? Or don't you like Chicanos, or what?"

He carefully placed his coffee cup on the table between us, and took a deep breath. "Garcia, I'm tired. I've been up for over thirty hours now. I know nothing happened to those clowns in Algoma because if a chipmunk craps in the woods around here, I hear about it. I'd like to go home, go to bed, maybe say hello to my wife so she remembers who I am, but instead I'm gonna nursemaid you around until you're satisfied there's nothing here because it's part of my job and because I noticed your Vietnam bracelet. Okay? But don't expect me to be cheery about it. I haven't got the energy."

"Terrific," I said. "So why don't we get on with it, and I can be on my way. Where do you suggest we start?"

"We see Faye at the Dewdrop," he said, rising, gulping the last of his coffee. I noticed he didn't bother to pay for it. I paid for mine.

Faye and the Dewdrop Inn were like a couple who'd been married too long. They resembled each other, and both had seen better days. Her red hair was carelessly rinsed, matching the blush of surface capillaries in

her cheeks, and both she and the ramshackle motel needed tidying up. If she was pleased to see us, she managed to conceal it.

"Morning, Faye. I need a look at your slips, if you don't mind."

"Wouldn't matter if I did, would it? Here, help yourself." She pushed a battered recipe file box across the counter.

"Roland Costa and Junior stayed here the day of Charlie's funeral, is that right?"

"If that's what it says there. No law against it, is there? They add a little class to this town, you ask me." Her diction had the forced precision of a serious drinker.

"There's no checkout time on the card. When did they leave?"

"Hell, Ira, there's no times for half the people that stay here. I can't be at the desk every minute. Folks pay in advance and that's what I'm in business for, not to . . ."

"What time do you *think* they left?" LeClair interrupted.

"I already told you I don't know," she said sullenly. "Now if you don't mind, I got things to do."

He stared at her for a moment, frowning. She traced a gouge in the scarred countertop as though she'd never seen it before.

"All right, Faye," he nodded, flipping the box lid shut. "I

guess that'll do it. For now."

"Gee," I said, "it's a good thing you came along, LeClair. She might not have told me a thing."

"She seems a bit . . . edgy," he conceded, keeping his eyes on the dirt road ahead as he skillfully piloted my rented sedan through the potholes on the road north from the village. Except for an occasional farmhouse, the countryside was as empty of people as the back of the moon.

"Faye's been known to be a bit lightfingered with her guests' belongings," he added. "That's probably all it was."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"No need to," he said curtly. "With luck you won't be in town long enough to need a room. We'll visit the cemetery and talk to the groundskeeper, Hec Michaud, and that should do it. You can get back to Motown, and maybe I can get to bed."

He slowed as we approached a line of elderly houses huddled beside a clapboard church, and turned in. The cemetery covered most of a hill behind the church, an island in a sea of cornfields. The tombstones were a hodgepodge of styles and sizes, but the lanes were swept, the grass neatly trimmed, and not everyone in it was dead.

Two men were working on a

plot about halfway up the hillside, or to be precise, one man was working, digging mechanically in a waist-deep grave, while the other sat with his back against a weathered headstone sipping from a can of generic beer. He was fortyish, barrel-shaped, with a stubbled moonface and wispy spikes of steel-gray hair poking out from beneath his greasy engineer's cap. He lumbered to his feet as we climbed up, smiling with beery good fellowship. "Welcome to Lovedale, gents. It ain't much as cemeteries go, but it's home. Hey, Paulie, quit diggin' for a minute. We got comp'ny."

The digger was younger, mid-thirties, lanky, an open apple-pie face and sandy hair. A deep welt of a scar ran from his left temple to the nape of his neck, the hair bordering it bone white. Despite the heat of the day his sweatstained denim work shirt was buttoned at the cuffs and throat. He clambered eagerly out of the hole with a grin like an April morning.

"Hey, Ira, good to see you."

"Good to see you too, Paulie. Looks like Hec's got you doing most of the work, as usual."

"Ahh, Paulie don't mind," the beer drinker said. "Strong as an ox and twice as smart. Right, Paulie?"

"Sure, Hec. You want me to keep shovelin'?"

"Take a break, Paulie," LeClair said. "I've got some questions for you both." Hec's smile remained fixed, but his grip tightened on the beer can.

"You want a beer, sheriff? Paulie, run up to the toolshed and get Ira a cold one."

"I don't want a beer, Hector, and Paulie isn't paid to be your errand boy. I want to know . . ."

"Who's this guy?" Hec asked, nodding warily toward me. "Maybe we don't wanna answer no questions with him here."

"This is Sergeant Garcia from Detroit. We're working together."

"What kinda work you gonna be doin'?" Hec sneered. "Bean pickin' season's over."

LeClair pushed two fingers into the heavier man's chest, backing him up. Michaud lost his footing in the loose earth and sat down hard in the open grave. Without spilling his beer. He stared up at LeClair more in surprise than anger, and a momentary flicker of satisfaction showed in his eyes.

"You had no call to do that, Ira," he said slowly, "none at all."

"Maybe not, Hec," LeClair said, kneeling at the edge of the grave, "but there are a few things I've been meaning to discuss with you for a while, and today's as good a day as any. If I were you, I'd just stay in that

hole for a bit while we have our little talk. Paulie, you take Sergeant Garcia up to the toolshed and get him a beer. He'll have some questions for you, and you answer 'em. Okay?"

"Do what he says, Paulie," Hec said from the grave. "Maybe he'll wanna talk to Billy, too, while you're up there."

I was puffing when we reached the toolshed. The climb hadn't affected Paulie at all. He took two beers from a cheap foam cooler and handed me one. "You in Vietnam?" he asked. I nodded.

"I thought so. I seen your bracelet. Ira's got one, too. I been meaning to get one, but . . . hey, you know, I had a friend there who was Mexican. I think he had a lotta names. You got a lotta names, too?"

"Sure," I said. "Lupe Jose Andrew Mardo Flores Garcia." My saints' names rolled off my tongue with surprising ease. I hadn't spoken them in years.

"Flores," he exclaimed eagerly, "hey, that was my friend's name. It means 'flower,' right?" I nodded, and I couldn't help smiling. His mood was contagious.

"Well, okay, Flower, why don't we pick out a comfortable hunk o' dirt here and we can sit and drink our beers. Ira said you wanted to ask me something?"

"Maybe you should ask Billy to come over," I said, glancing around uncertainly. "That way I won't have to ask the questions twice."

"You can ask him from here if you talk loud enough," he said. "He's buried over there by the fence next to Major Gault."

I took a long, thoughtful pull at my beer before glancing over at him. He was watching my reaction out of the corner of his eye, deadpan. "Gotcha," he said softly, the smile finally breaking through. "Don't worry, Flower, I'm not bananas. I talk to Billy sometimes, but only to get a rise out of Hec. I know he's dead. I damn near died with him. We was friends in high school, got drafted together, same outfit in 'Nam. We was even in the same foxhole when this Cong grenade drops in. We both tried to throw the damn thing out and wound up knocking ourselves cockeyed instead. It would have been pretty funny except then the grenade went off and Billy came here to Lovedale and I wound up at the Vet's Facility in Grand Rapids for two years. Believe it or not, it's nicer here at Lovedale."

"How long have you been working here?"

"I'm not really sure," he said, frowning. "Major Gault's been here since 1864 or '62, and Billy's stone says 1973, but I'm

not very good at numbers any more so I can't say exactly how long I've been here. That's a funny thing about cemeteries. Time doesn't matter much anyway. Like, the major and Billy lived maybe a hundred years apart, but now they're here together, probably swapping war stories and stuff. At least, I hope so." He lapsed into silence, sipping his beer.

"About three weeks ago there was a funeral here. Charles Costa's. Do you remember that?"

"Sure I remember it. It's only numbers I have trouble with, things like that."

"Sorry, I didn't . . . well, anyway, were both you and Hector working that day?"

"Nah, just me. It was on a Saturday and Hec don't like to work Saturdays. It was a funny one, though."

"What do you mean, funny?"

"It was the biggest sendoff I ever seen. See that big ugly hunk of marble with the cedars planted around it, like they were keeping it separate from the riffraff in the rest of the cemetery? That's Costa's. Really something, isn't it. And you shoulda seen his casket. It must've been standard size, but it sure looked bigger, burnished copper with buried walnut inserts. Probably weighed a ton. Maybe that was the problem."

"Problem?"

"After the funeral, the director couldn't get the mechanism that lowers the box to work, but that isn't what I meant about its being funny. The funeral director wasn't a local guy, he was from Detroit, Claudio something or other, and he must've had a dozen assistants with him, dressed like headwaiters and scrambling around here like a school gym on prom night putting out flowers and stuff. Then, after all that, nobody came. Just Rol Costa, Jr., and his old man. Just the two of 'em."

"They were here, then? You saw them?"

"Yeah, I know Rol from school, and I've seen his old man around. They showed up in this big Lincoln, stuck old Charlie in the ground, and that was that."

"And no one was here other than the funeral people, you, and Hec?"

"I already told you Hec wasn't here," he said, with a trace of irritation. "Hec don't like working Saturdays."

"It looks like you do most of the work even when he's here."

"Could be," he shrugged. "Look, maybe Hec takes advantage of me a little, but I don't care. I'm just glad to be out of that hospital and doing something, even if it's only digging graves. Besides, sometimes Hec

stands up for me, like with old lady Stansfield. She's got a house near the west fence, and she don't like me, you know? When we had a complaint about me working without a shirt, I knew who it was, and I asked Hec to talk to her about it and he did. He don't get many complaints about my work, though. This place looks pretty nice, doesn't it, Flower? Maybe not to move into, but you know what I mean."

"It looks good, Paulie," I agreed. "Anybody can see you work very hard. When did the Costas leave?"

"Right after the funeral, I guess. I'm not sure 'cause I was asleep behind the toolshed."

"Thanks," I said, "I appreciate your help." Without thinking I slipped the thin gold band from my wrist and handed it to him.

"Hey, Flower," he said, his eyes widening, "you don't have to give me nothing. I mean, I'm just glad to have somebody to talk to, you know?"

"It's all right, Paulie, I . . . I've got another one at home. Take it, please."

"Well, thanks. I've been meaning to get one, but . . . well, thanks a lot." He eased it carefully on his wrist, admiring it as it caught the glint of the morning sun. "I wish I had something I

could..." He fumbled in the pocket of his faded work shirt. "Here, you want a couple of joints? It's not bad stuff."

I accepted one of the crudely rolled cigarettes and sniffed it. It was pure, uncut. "Where did you get these?"

"You ever do a long boonie recon in 'Nam?" he asked, smiling slyly.

I nodded.

"Well, that's how I got it," he said. "I just lived off the bounty of the land."

I glanced around, and for a moment the cemetery and the fields around it had the scent of danger, like the jungle, but only for a moment. "I think I'd better be going," I said, getting to my feet. "I see the sheriff's helping Hector out of his hole."

We drove most of the way back to town in silence, each of us in his own thoughts. "Paulie said they were here, and then they left," I said finally. "You get anything from Hector?"

"Nope, and I don't think he'll vote for me in the next election, either. He said he wasn't here the day of the funeral. That about wrap it up for you? I can't think of anyone else."

"I can't, either. Look, I appreciate your help on this thing."

"No charge," he sighed, "it

comes with the territory. You know, if I'd been awake when you came in this morning I could have saved us some running around. The Costas are a hard lot, all of 'em, and they grew up around here. There's no way anything could have happened to 'em in a place like Algoma."

"You're probably right," I said. "Still, checking things out is part of the job. Paulie mentioned a funeral director named Claudio. Mean anything to you?"

"Rigoni's Funeral Home. They do work out here sometimes, but they're based in Detroit. Legitimate, as far as I know."

"I'll look them up when I get home, but it doesn't sound like much."

He pulled the sedan over to the curb in front of his office. "Well, here we are. Sorry things didn't work out for you, but I told you so. You going straight back?"

"Maybe I'll do a little sight-seeing," I said. "I don't get out of the city much, and you've got a nice little town here."

"We like it. If you need anything else I'll be in my office at least until those Guardsmen get here. I'll have to thank 'em for coming, I guess, even if it's for nothing. I really oughta find an honest job. Have a good trip, Garcia." He flipped me a mock salute and strode off.

I drove around for a bit, wondering what people found to keep them in a town six blocks long. I pulled in at a storefront office with "Village of Algoma" stenciled crudely on a plywood sign in the window.

The clerk literally dragged himself to the counter, a stroke-shattered old hulk of a man with a paralyzed leg, an arm strapped to his belt, and one side of his weatherbeaten face sagging like so much melted wax. His cheek was further distorted by a huge cud of tobacco. He leaned his good arm on the counter and spat a stream of brown juice in the general direction of the spittoon against the wall. Dead center. "Do somethin' for ya?" he asked.

"I'd like to see a plat book for the county, please."

"Got one right here." He pulled a slim folder from beneath the counter and flipped it open to Algoma County. "Some of these titles ain't current, but I know most of the landholders around here. Any particular parcel in mind?"

I traced the line of Lovedale Road north on the map with a fingertip. "Here, the land around the cemetery."

"Well, there are houses north and south of it, but . . ."

"No, I'm interested in these fields around it to the west. All of that property seems to be

owned by . . . somebody named Lund?"

"Max Lund," he nodded. "He don't live in Algoma no more, but he still owns the land."

"It has corn growing on it now."

"He's farming it on shares. I believe Hec Michaud is working some of it. He put in some raggedy-ass corn this spring. Hec ain't much of a farmer."

"I thought he was in charge of the cemetery."

"He is. You from the city?"

I nodded.

"Figured so," he said, and spat another stream toward the spittoon. "You see, in a town like Algoma, a man can't make it with just one job. Most folks do a little of this and that to get by. Hec does the cemetery, paints houses, and does a little farmin' now and again."

"How about the sneriff?" I asked. "He do a little farming, too?"

"Sometimes," he said, examining me carefully with his good eye, "sometimes he does."

LeClair was sleeping in his office chair, his grubby jogging shoes up on his desk. I let the door slam behind me and he jerked awake with a start.

"You back again?" he said, groggy and still half asleep. "I thought you'd left. Those Guardsmen here yet?"

"I haven't seen them," I said,

sitting on the edge of his desk. "I've got a little time to kill before my plane'll be ready. Thought maybe we could have a goodbye smoke." I took the joint from my shirt pocket and placed it on his desk. "Have one on me. It's bomb weed."

He stared at me blankly.

"Go ahead. You'll feel better and nobody's here but us cops."

A slow flush rose above the collar of his T-shirt. "Garcia," he said tightly, "I noticed Paulie was wearing your bracelet when you came down the hill today. That was a nice thing to do. So, because of that, and since you're a city boy and don't know any better, I'll give you thirty seconds to flip that reefer in the wastebasket and get the hell out of my office, or I'm gonna throw your butt in jail."

"Open it up," I said, "take a look at the weed."

Still scowling, he tore the paper apart, spilling the leaves on his desk. He picked one up and sniffed it. "This is green and it hasn't been cut. I'd guess it's local, right? Where did you get it?"

"From a guy who knows how to live off the land. As an informant he'll have to remain anonymous, of course."

"Sure," he said dryly. "Gee, I wonder who it could be? Where did he find it?"

"In the cornfields near the

cemetery. There's an area to the southwest where maybe every fourth plant is marijuana."

"Hec Michaud!" he said, slamming his fist on the desk-top. "I knew something was wrong out there today! I could feel it in my bones, but I thought it had something to do with the Costas. How much do you figure is out there?"

"I don't know, a couple of bales, maybe. Enough."

"And you thought maybe I was in on it, didn't you?"

"Sorry," I shrugged. "Like you said, I'm from out of town."

"Sorry" doesn't quite cover it. Where the hell do you get off assuming I was corrupt? Or don't they have honest cops in the city any more?"

"You're right, it was stupid of me. I mean, what kind of graft could you get around here anyway? Chickens and ducks?"

"I manage to scrape by on my salary. Dumb, maybe, but . . ."

"Look, I've already apologized, okay? And you might as well accept it 'cause it's all you get. You'd have wondered, too."

"Yes," he conceded, grudgingly, "I suppose I would have. All right, apology accepted, for now. At least I'll have something for those Guardsmen to do when they get here. You want in on the collar?"

"No, it's not what I came here

for and I haven't had anything to eat all day. I'm gonna pop over to Tubby's for a sandwich. Maybe I'll stop out later to see how it's going."

The harvest was in full swing when I pulled into the cemetery. A dozen National Guardsmen in green fatigue uniforms were hacking industriously away in the corn and carrying the marijuana plants to a pile at the edge of the field, where LeClair and two Guard officers were conferring. I noticed Hec Michaud sitting disconsolately in a jeep, handcuffed to the steering wheel. I walked over. "Hey, meester," I said, "ju know where an hombre can find a chob pickin' beans?" He just stared at the dashboard. No sense of humor.

"Hey, Flower, come on up! I got bleacher seats and cold beer!"

Paulie was sitting with his back against the toolshed on the hill, observing the proceedings. I made the long climb and sat next to him. He passed me a can of generic beer. "Quite a show," he said.

"So it is," I said. "Look, I'm sorry if this . . . puts a crimp in your recreation."

"Hell, Flower," he grinned, "I can't smoke that stuff. I have enough trouble keeping track of things as it is. Hec gave me

those joints, probably so I'd keep my mouth shut. Maybe I should have. I'm sure gonna hate losing my job here."

"I don't see why you should."

"Maybe you don't," he said quietly, "but you're going to be-cause if they keep searchin' in the direction they're going now, they're gonna find the car."

I turned slowly and stared. "What car?"

"A silver Lincoln." His voice was a whisper now, and he wouldn't meet my eyes. "Hec was gonna hide it in the field and then get rid of it later, but it got stuck, so we just covered it up."

"The Costas' car?"

He nodded.

"When did this happen?"

"You mean when did we hide it? I'm not sure," he said, frowning. "It was after the casket got stuck . . . but I already told you that, didn't I?"

"You told me it got stuck, but you didn't tell me the rest, did you? Paulie, it's going to come out anyway now. I want you to tell me what happened. All of it. Just take it slow. Now, you said the casket got stuck?"

"Well, I didn't know it was stuck at first. I was sacked out behind the toolshed when this guy Claudio wakes me up. He's havin' a heart attack because his box is jammed in the frame, and everybody's gone but him

and Mr. Costa. So I went and took a look at it. It was jammed all right, but we got a crank here in the shed to lower 'em manually if that happens, so I came back up here to get it. On the way back I could hear Claudio and Mr. Costa arguin' clear across the cemetery. Finally, Claudio went stompin' over to his hearse and drove off, which was odd because the director's supposed to see the casket's lowered and the vault lid is in place before he leaves. Mr. Costa was just standin' there lookin' at the coffin when I came up behind him. That's when I noticed it. Charlie's million dollar box had a little hunk of red cloth sticking out along one seam. Not very neat. Mr. Costa'd noticed it, too, 'cause that's what he was starin' at. He jumped a foot when I walked up. He told me to lower the box, and I said the funeral director was supposed to be there. 'Mr. Rigoni's been called away and I'll take full responsibility,' he says. 'You just lower it, and here's something for your trouble,' and he holds out a hundred dollar bill. That's a lotta money, right?"

"Yes," I said, "that's a lot of money."

"I thought so, too. I'm not very good at numbers any more, but I figured there was something wrong, you know? So I said I couldn't lower it by my-

self, I'd need help. He started to argue, but he noticed me staring at the box. His eyes kind of narrowed and he just turned and walked down to his car and tore out of the cemetery, spraying gravel all over the place.

"I knelt down and took a closer look at the red cloth. It moved. Just a little, like something was trying to pull it back inside the coffin. So I rapped on the lid. 'Is anybody in there?' I said, feeling really stupid. It was the first time I ever tried talking to a stiff when I wasn't just trying to get a rise out of Hector. Still, it seemed like the cloth had moved."

"What did you do?"

Paulie shrugged. "Well, there wasn't nobody there but me and that box, so I unscrewed the lid dogs and opened it. She sat up and I sat down. Hard. A lady in a red dress, with blood on the side of her head, groggy, and maybe blinded by the light. 'Help me,' she said."

"Cindy Kessel," I said. "Charlie's girlfriend."

"She was mumbling about not saying anything about Charlie's business," he nodded, "but she was just sort of rambling, like she was in a daze. Then she must have come out of it a little because she looked down at who she was sitting on. Her eyes rolled up and she fell

back down on old Charlie. He didn't seem to mind."

"What happened then?"

"Well, I didn't know what she was to Charlie, but I didn't figure she belonged in the same box with him, so I hauled her out and shut the lid. I wasn't sure what to do. She needed help and nobody was around and I didn't want to just leave her there, so I picked her up and jogged over to Mrs. Stansfield's. The old lady doesn't like me much, but I couldn't think of anyplace else to go.

"I hammered on the door but nobody came and the damn thing was locked. I was tired from the run, my head was pounding..." He took a deep breath. "The girl... Cindy? Is that her name?"

I nodded.

"She was still unconscious. I could see the dust of Costa's limo coming back and I knew I had to do something, so I put my shoulder to the door, got it open, and set the girl inside. Then I ran back to the grave, keeping low. I didn't want Costa to know where I'd been, and it was kind of fun anyway, like being back in the army.

"Mr. Costa had brought his son with him, Rol Junior. Do you know Rol?"

"I know who he is," I said. "He's a... rough customer."

"I knew him from school,"

Paulie said, "mean as a snake. Mr. Costa said he'd brought him along to help with the casket. I said okay, but he musta noticed I was breathing hard or something because he looked at me kind of funny, and then he checked the box. I hadn't screwed the lid dogs back in. When he looked at me again, his eyes had gone as dead as Charlie's. 'Where is she, boy,' he says, 'what have you done with her?'"

"I just played dumb, which ain't too hard for me. I don't know what you mean," I says.

"'We got no time for this,' Rol Junior says: 'He'll tell us when I show him what his guts look like,' and he pulled an eight-inch blade. Man, that thing flicked open in his hands like magic."

"What happened?"

"He wasn't no soldier," Paulie shrugged, "he was just a guy with a knife. My head doesn't work so good since the grenade got me and Billy, but I can still understand a guy with a knife. He came straight at me, which was a big mistake. I snatched his knife wrist and spun him around into a choke hold, keeping him between me and his old man. Mr. Costa pulled this ugly little automatic, and he was circling around trying to get a shot when the girl screamed and he looked away. That was an even

bigger mistake." He took a long pull from his beer.

"Where are they now, Paulie?" I asked quietly. "Are they in the car?"

"The car? Nah. I figured that monument stone of Charlie's was too big for one guy anyway, but it's just about right for three, and it says 'Costa' on it, right?"

"And the girl, Paulie? What about the girl?"

"She's still staying at Mrs. Stansfield's. I went over there later to talk to her, but she was pretty weak and couldn't say much. I'll bet she's glad to be out of that box, though."

"I imagine she is," I said, releasing a long, ragged breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "Paulie, we're going to have to tell Ira about this, you know."

"I wanted to in the first place, but Hec said I'd get in trouble. I think he just didn't want anybody snooping around here. One good thing at least, Mrs. Stansfield seems to like me a little better now. Maybe she was only grouchy before because she was lonely."

"Maybe so," I said, frowning. Something he'd said was gnawing at the back of my memory. "Paulie, didn't you tell me Mrs. Stansfield's house was west of the cemetery?"

He nodded. I stared across the fields of golden corn that

ran unbroken to the pine-covered hills on the horizon. The setting sun was hanging above them like a single fiery eye. "Paulie, there is no house west of the cemetery."

"Sure there is," he said, with a trace of irritation. "That stone one, over by the fence. Mrs. Stansfield's been there even longer than the major, since 1852, I think, or maybe '51. I'm not very good at numbers any more."

“What do you think will happen to him?" I asked.

"You tell me," LeClair said, slumping back in the seat of my rental sedan. He looked utterly exhausted, but his eyes were bright, almost feverish. He was watching the men in the rear of the jeep ahead of us as we followed the small convoy back to Algoma in the gathering dusk. Paulie was talking animatedly with a couple of Guardsmen, their smiles occasionally visible in the flickering headlights.

"Can you see Paulie on the stand at the coroner's inquest?" he said softly. "They'll tear him apart. He'll go to Ypsilanti for a three month psycho evaluation, then back to the Vet's Facility if he's lucky, and maybe prison if he's not."

"That's probably how it'll go

down," I conceded. "He killed two people, and at least contributed to the death of a third."

"Actually, I don't know whether he did or not," LeClair said thoughtfully. "I only know what you told me. I'm just a small-town sheriff, and the Costas and Stansfields are rich, influential folks. I might be very reluctant to order an exhumation on the word of some poor, brain-damaged vet."

I glanced over at him. "You can't be serious."

"I don't know," he said. "I'll give it to you straight. I don't give a damn about what happened to the Costas, I'm just sorry it happened here. I feel bad about the girl, but she should have been choosier about her playmates, and there's no helping her now. That only leaves Paulie. He's already been ground up in the machinery once, and I really hate to see him fed back into the hopper again."

"Three people are dead."

"You're wrong, sport, a lot more people are dead than that. They got their tails shot off while Roland Costa's son was using his draft exemption to learn the family rackets, and Paulie Croft was getting his head rearranged so he could be

a gravedigger instead of a trucker like his old man. So I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Garcia. Nothing. Nada. I'm dumping it on you. You decide who owes who what, and then let me know. Okay?"

"That's not fair," I said flatly.

"No kidding?" he said, stifling a yawn, "Well, we don't have to be fair. We're the law. And don't worry about Hec. I can handle him."

"You've got to be hallucinating from lack of sleep," I snapped, "or maybe all this fresh air's affected your mind. You could never get away with anything like that."

"You're probably right," he admitted, "but at least I'm covered if we get caught. I'll just scuff my toe in the dirt and say I was taken in by a smooth-talking slicker from the big city. I don't know what your excuse could be, but that's your problem."

The faint sound of laughter from the jeep ahead drifted past us on the wind, and I could see the streetlights of the village glowing in the distance. Both of them. "I don't know, either," I said slowly, "but maybe I won't need one. I mean, what could possibly happen to anybody in a hick town like this?"

FICTION

Life, Death, and Other Trivial Concerns

by Robert Loy



The apartment was quiet when Danny McKyle returned from an evening of bagpipe music at the annual Scottish Highlands Festival in Lincoln.

Passing through the foyer and into the living room, he nearly dropped the tam o'shanter he had purchased as

a souvenir. Frank Huffton, his roommate, was reading a book—several books, to judge from the disorderly semicircle of volumes around his rocking chair.

That's a first, Danny thought. I've never seen him read anything but racing tipsheets before.

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

"Everything go all right at the track today?" Danny eased himself down onto the sofa, and set the tam o'shanter on the cushion beside him.

"Didn't go to the track," Frank mumbled, without looking up from his book.

"In that case I guess I'd better go turn on the heater; it must be going to snow."

Frank turned a page but did not answer.

"That must be some book you're reading."

Frank still made no response. His lips moved a silent chant as his eyes zigzagged down the page.

Danny stood up and walked across the room. Ignoring his arthritis, he bent down and examined the titles scattered on the carpet. *The Dictionary of Trivia, Trivia Madness, Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Trivia but Were Afraid to Ask.*

"When did you—"

"What time is it?" Frank slammed the book shut and sprang out of his rocking chair.

Danny straightened up slowly. He pulled back the sleeve of his sweater. "It's twenty-five after—"

"You paid the phone bill, right?" Frank dashed into the kitchen and plucked the telephone receiver off its cradle. He replaced it as soon as he heard the dial tone. He then turned

and lunged for something he expected to be on the counter, but froze when he saw nothing there but a square patch of glistening Formica. He marched to the kitchen table and sat on the edge of a chair.

"What time did you say it was?"

"I didn't," Danny answered.

"But it's twenty-five after eight."

"They'll be calling any minute now. Toss me one of those books. I'll do a little last-minute cramming."

Danny picked up the nearest trivia book and carried it into the kitchen.

"What's this all about, Frank?"

"This is about the chance of a lifetime, Danny boy. WRAL radio is sponsoring a trivia contest, and I'm going to win."

"How do you know?"

"I can't miss. All I gotta do is wait for them to pick my postcard. Then, when they call me, I answer three trivia questions. That's all there is to it."

"What makes you so sure they're going to select your postcard? They probably received thousands of postcards in a contest like this. The odds against their picking yours are astronomical."

"I know all about odds." Frank winked. "That's why I got busy last week and evened them up a bit."

"What do you mean?"

"I sent three hundred and fifty postcards."

"What?"

"It's worth it, Danny boy. The prize is a trip to Las Vegas. Do you know how long I've dreamed about going to Vegas?"

"Well, turn on the radio. Let's—" Danny's gaze fell on the bare kitchen counter. "Hey! Where's my radio?"

"I, uh, had to take it in for some repairs."

"No, you didn't. You pawned it. You pawned my radio. Frank, I—"

"Relax," Frank said. "I had to pay for all those stamps somehow. Besides, I'll make it up to you when I win this contest. The trip is for two. I'm going to take you to Vegas with me."

Danny shook his head. "No, you're not. I'd rather keep my sanity if you don't mind."

The telephone went off like a time bomb.

Frank knocked over his chair, snatched up the receiver, and shouted, "Hello" before it could ring a second time.

"Yes. Yes, this is me," he said. "I mean, I'm he. I mean—"

Danny hurried down the hall to his bedroom. He dug an old transistor radio out of the bottom drawer of his dresser and tuned it to WRAL.

"—for that grand prize," a fast-talking disc jockey said. "Listen closely, Mr. Huffton.

Here is your first question: Name the famous Scottish engineer who built the first practical steam engine."

"I—uh—let me see." The sound of furiously turning pages came through the speaker.

Still clutching the radio, Danny ran back to the kitchen.

"It's right on the tip of my tongue," Frank said, his fingers racing through the trivia book.

"Watt," Danny whispered. "James Watt."

"What?" asked Frank.

"That's right, Mr. Huffton. You've taken the first step on your way to Las Vegas. Now for your next question: What famous fictional detective lives at 13 Rover Avenue in Idaville?"

Frank looked expectantly at Danny.

"Encyclopedia Brown."

Frank crossed his fingers. "Encyclopedia Brown?"

"Absolutely right," said the disc jockey. "One more, Mr. Huffton, and you win. This last question is an easy one: how long did the Hundred Years' War last?"

"One hundred and sixteen years," Danny said.

Frank shook his head and turned his back on his roommate. "One hundred years, of course."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Huffton," said the disc jockey. "The Hundred Years' War lasted one hundred and sixteen years."

"Whaaat?" Frank shrieked. "I thought you said it was an easy one, you lying—"

"Thanks for playing our trivia game with us, Mr. Huffton. You've been a good sport, and we have a nice consolation prize for you."

"I don't want a consolation prize, you son of a bachelor. I want my—"

The discjockey broke the connection. Frank dropkicked the telephone into the sink.

"How do you like that no-good crook? Cheating me out of my trip to Las Vegas." Frank stomped into the living room, cursing with every step. "Made me hurt my foot, too."

"There's no sense in getting all upset like this, Frank."

"Oh, sure, that's easy for you to say." He flung himself onto the sofa, flattening Danny's new tam o'shanter. "You didn't sprain your tongue licking three hundred and fifty stamps. You didn't spend all that time trying to memorize those stupid trivia books."

Danny got up and rescued the telephone from the sink.

"This is all your fault, Danny boy."

"Oh, really?" Danny switched off the kitchen light and joined his roommate in the living room.

"That's right. Why didn't you tell me you knew all that trivia?"

"It never came up in conversation."

Frank narrowed his eyes. "Where did you learn all that stuff, anyway?"

"I don't know, Frank. That's the way my subconscious works. It hangs onto everything I've ever read or heard, and then supplies me with the information whenever I need it. It's my Scotch heritage, I suppose. A Scotsman is as thrifty with facts as he is with money. He would never throw away a scrap of knowledge he might be able to use someday."

Frank scowled. "Go jump in a loch."

"Actually, it's sort of a mixed blessing. I can remember the names of the nine Muses and the Seven Little Foys, but sometimes forget my own. I can tell you the names of Doc Savage's crew or Uncle Wiggly's housekeeper, but I can't tell you what I had for breakfast this morning."

"No, that's not it. You and that stupid disc jockey tricked me. The stuff in those books I studied was a lot harder than those dumb questions I got asked. That's it, isn't it?"

"That must be it, Frank. You're overqualified for trivia games. Good night."

"Hey, hold on, Scotsman. If you're so smart, let's see you answer some of the questions in those books. I bet you can't answer one—well, let's say two—of them."

Danny snorted.

"Is it a bet then?"

"Not tonight, Frank. I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"You're not scared, are you, Danny boy?"

"No, just sleepy. Tomorrow, all right?" He turned and started toward the hall.

"Wait." Frank jumped up and grabbed Danny's wrist. "Come on, Danny, let's bet. You remember that twenty I owe you?"

"Which twenty, Frank? If you paid back half of the twenties you owe me I could open up an Andrew Jackson portrait gallery."

"Double or nothing, okay? Just three questions." Frank's hand was clammy, and his eyeglasses slid down his nose in the perspiration that had broken out there.

"Tomorrow, I promise. First thing in the morning. Before I have my coffee even." Danny twisted his wrist free and walked away.

"Hey. Wait a minute." Frank trotted down the hall after his roommate. "I'll tell you what. I'll go ahead and write out your questions tonight. No—better yet—I'll hide the forty bucks somewhere in the apartment and make up a trivia clue to its location. Tomorrow morning if you find it, it's yours. If not, we forget that twenty, okay?"

Danny paused, his hand on the door to his bedroom. "I've

already forgotten it, Frank. There's no point in leaving the lights on for something that's never coming home again."

"But is it a deal?"

"If you'll let me go to bed," Danny sighed.

"Deal."

Frank disappeared up the corridor, and Danny went to bed. His sleep that night was deep and, except for one odd dream, undisturbed. He dreamed he was the bandleader at a dance for the nine Muses and the Seven Little Foys. Due to the shortage of Foys, two of the Muses, Thalia and Melpomene, the muses of Comedy and Tragedy, had to dance with each other.

The late morning sun was streaming in through the kitchen window the next morning when. Danny, wearing his favorite plaid bathrobe, padded into the room. There were no signs to suggest that Frank was up yet.

It's just as well he's still asleep, Danny thought. I seem to recall making some ridiculously rash promise about tackling that trivia before I had my coffee. I must have been delirious. My whole body is screaming for a cup of the bonnie black.

He tossed six healthy scoops of Folgers into a filter and switched on the brewer. While

he was waiting for Mr. Coffee to dispense his favors, Danny walked around the living room, surveying the damage there. Balls of wadded-up paper lay everywhere, causing the room to resemble that corner of a kid's fort where the snowball arsenal is stored. Acrobatic trivia books practiced their tumbles in and around the rocking chair. A few of the clumsier ones lay off to one side, recuperating from cracked vertebrae and slipped disks.

In the middle of this circus rested the last remains of a legal pad: one wrinkled yellow sheet. At the top of this sheet, in Frank's neatest scrawl, was written: *East of Eden, where I keep my Jefferson City Junior High School science teacher.*

That makes no sense whatsoever, Danny thought. It must be my trivia clue. He carried the paper back to the kitchen with him. At the table, with a steaming hot cup of coffee in his hand, he reviewed the cryptic sentence. He decided to go ahead and work on it before his roommate awoke because it looked harder than the average trivia question and he would need quiet to solve it, not Frank at his elbow badgering him about betting.

East of Eden. Well, that was a novel by John Steinbeck and later a movie starring James Dean. If that's a clue to some-

place in the apartment, Danny reasoned, it must be referring to the ceiling because it's way over my head.

Jefferson City Junior High School was easier. That was where Mr. Peepers taught science in the old television series that bore his name.

Danny took another sip of coffee and tugged at his earlobe for inspiration. East of Eden, where I keep my Mr. Peepers?

Wait a minute. Before Steinbeck borrowed the phrase, East of Eden was a quote from the book of Genesis referring to the land of Nod, where Cain went after he slew his brother Abel.

Danny got out of his chair and walked down the hall. He did not think to knock before entering his friend's room. There on the bedside stand was the object Danny was looking for: Frank's empty eyeglasses case. He picked it up and thrust two long bony fingers inside. The slip of paper he pulled out read *I.O.U. \$40—unless you cheated.* Danny smiled. He had solved it correctly.

But Frank had obviously put a lot of work into the thing. It was the trickiest use of trivia Danny had ever come across. East of Eden = land of Nod = a place to sleep, a bedroom. Jefferson City Junior High School science teacher = Mr. Peepers = eyeglasses. Very clever.

The telephone rang. Danny

became aware of his surroundings for the first time.

Frank's bed was empty. It was also unmade. Not that there was anything unusual about that: Frank's bed was always unmade. But it looked as though it had not been slept in. Frank often went out in the afternoon or evening without saying where he was going, but he had never stayed out all night before.

Danny raced to the kitchen and took a fortifying sip of lukewarm coffee before answering the phone.

"Hello?"

"Mr. McKyle?"

"Yes."

"Mr. McKyle," a gruff but courteous voice said, "I want to reassure you, first of all, that your friend Mr. Huffton has not been kidnapped. He is unharmed. He is with me of his own accord, more or less. In short, he is not kidnapped. Understood?"

"Understood," Danny answered. Oh my God, he thought, Frank's been kidnapped.

"I am emphasizing the fact that he is not kidnapped," the voice continued, "because that situation may change at any moment.

"You see, Mr. McKyle, I am a businessman, a bookmaker to be specific. Your roommate is a client of mine, and he owes me some money. Not a lot of money, but there's a principle

involved here. I've been waiting patiently for several months now and, well, I've run out of patience."

"How much is it?" Danny asked, trying to remember how much money he had in his savings account. Two or three hundred dollars, it seemed like. That should certainly cover any of Frank's penny-ante debts.

"Thirty thousand dollars."

Danny felt ill.

"Like I said, not a large sum. But I am a businessman and you can't run a business that way. You understand, I'm sure."

"Yes, I understand," Danny said, although he didn't understand it at all.

"Mr. Huffton is one of my best customers. That's why I've carried him on my books as long as I have. But the time has come, Mr. McKyle, for the debt to be paid. One way or another."

"What do you mean? What do you want?"

"Calm down, Mr. McKyle. I find it extremely difficult to discuss business with someone who is hysterical.

"Now. Mr. Huffton is your roommate and I'm sure you know him better than I do, but it seems to me Mr. Huffton's favorite phrase is 'double or nothing.' He has persuaded me, against my better judgment, to wager the entire thirty thousand on one roll of the dice, so to speak. I agreed because in

addition to being a businessman I'm also a sportsman. You understand, I'm sure.

"However," the gruff voice added, "since this wager concerns you, and because when I tell you what the bet is about you may think Mr. Huffton has lost his mind, I'm giving you this chance to call it off and pay your friend's debt."

"I don't follow you," Danny said. "What is this bet? How does it concern me?" He felt as though he were in one of those horrible half-awake dreams where nothing makes any sense. He visualized himself reaching through the telephone wires and grabbing this kidnapper-that-was-not-a-kidnapper by the throat, shaking him, and making him stop this insane nightmare.

"Well, you see, Mr. McKyle, as we were discussing this situation, Mr. Huffton regrettably lost his temper and made several disparaging remarks concerning my lineage. I never use profanity, so I can't quote him verbatim, but in effect he said that my parents were not legally wed at the time of my birth. He went on to say that he doubted they were even on a first-name basis with each other. Although I am now sure he was speaking figuratively, I responded literally. I told him my parents' names and the date they were married. A date, I

might add, well in advance of the day I was born.

"With that Mr. Huffton went berserk. He said if I were to give you the same information you would be able to deduce our location from it. I tried to reason with him, but he just became more insistent. Finally, knowing that Mr. Huffton had no inkling of his destination when we left his apartment, and knowing there was no way you could trace this call, I took the bet. Contingent upon your cooperation, of course."

There was a long pause and then, "Well, Mr. McKyle?"

"Well what?" asked Danny, still trying to wade through the kidnapper's stream of rhetoric.

"Will you take this opportunity to wipe out Mr. Huffton's debt, or would you prefer to handle this my way?"

The way the man growled the words "my way" sounded ominous to Danny, but this bet was sheer lunacy. What did Frank think he was doing? Had the kidnapper been right in saying Frank had lost his mind? He had certainly had the look of a man coming unhinged last night.

On the other hand, what choice did he have? There was no way he would be able to raise thirty thousand dollars. This bet, insane as it was, seemed to be the only chance to save Frank. At the very least it

would buy a little time. If he took this bet and lost, Danny assumed the ransom would be doubled, and sixty thousand was no more impossible than thirty thousand. Either way Frank would almost certainly be killed.

"I want to talk to Frank," Danny said, "to make sure he's all right."

"Mr. McKyle," the gruff voice laughed, "some of my business associates call me eccentric, and they're probably right. Eccentric I may be; crazy I'm not. Do you think I'm going to let you speak to Mr. Huffton and have him give you our location in some code you two have worked out? I assure you, Mr. McKyle, I would not be wasting my valuable time playing a ridiculous game like this if Mr. Huffton were not alive and well and insisting that I do so."

"All right," Danny said, swallowing the bowling ball in his throat, "I'll take the bet."

"Are you sure you want to do that, Mr. McKyle?"

Danny could think of a million things he would rather do. Waking from this nightmare topped the list.

"I'll take the bet," he repeated.

"Very well, Mr. McKyle, here are the terms. I'm going to give you the names of my parents and the date they were married. Thirty minutes later I will

call you back, and if you can tell me where I'm calling from at that time, Mr. Huffton walks out of here, doesn't owe me a dime. I'll even spring for his cab ride home to show I'm a good sport. That's if you can tell me both the street name and number, Mr. McKyle.

"If you are unable to supply me with that information, however, we'll have to handle this thing my way." Again that ominous tone. "Mr. Huffton will then owe me sixty thousand dollars. Now, I'm not threatening to kidnap your roommate, and I'm not saying that you will necessarily start receiving pieces of Mr. Huffton in the mail. But stranger things have happened and, one way or another, the debt *will* be paid. You understand, I'm sure."

"I understand," Danny mumbled. I understand that if I can't pull off a major miracle you're going to murder my friend.

"One more thing, Mr. McKyle. I do hope you won't think me rude for mentioning this, but don't do anything stupid like calling the police. I assure you nothing good could come from such an action. They wouldn't catch me. I fear Mr. Huffton would meet with some grave accident. And since no crime has been committed, they couldn't arrest me anyway. Even if they did, I'd be free in a couple of hours. A man in my line of

business makes a great many friends, some of them in very high places." The gruff voice paused to let that sink in.

"Are you ready, Mr. McKyle? I am anxious to get this over with."

"I'm ready."

"My parents were named Joe and Ruth. They were married on February 11, 1927. Good luck, Mr. McKyle." The line went dead.

For several seconds Danny McKyle stood like a wax figure of Alexander Graham Bell, staring dumbly at the telephone in his hand. How quickly had this instrument turned his life upside down. With one call he had been ejected from his safe, quiet world of bagpipes and Social Security to a violent, frightening planet of kidnap and murder. And he knew the next time it rang it would be tolling the imminent death of his best friend.

Danny hung up the phone and turned to look at the clock on the wall. Eleven thirty-three. He grabbed a pen from somewhere and sat before the wrinkled sheet of paper at the kitchen table. At first he did not recognize the *East of Eden*, where I keep my Jefferson City Junior High School science teacher written there. Had it only been this morning that this had seemed important? It seemed life times ago.

Joe and Ruth, February 11, 1927, he wrote. Was he really expected to extract a street name and number from that? Maybe Frank had just been stalling, giving Danny time to call the police. He absently took a sip of ice-cold coffee while he pondered. No, he realized, he could not call the police. As much as he would like to put this burden of responsibility on shoulders stronger than his own, he was all alone in this dangerous new world, and he knew it.

Joe and Ruth, February 11, 1927?

Trivia! Could it have something to do with trivia? Was it another of Frank's trivia clues? That was the only explanation Danny could come up with, but how could it?

He scribbled down all the bits of trivia he could think of connected with the name Joe.

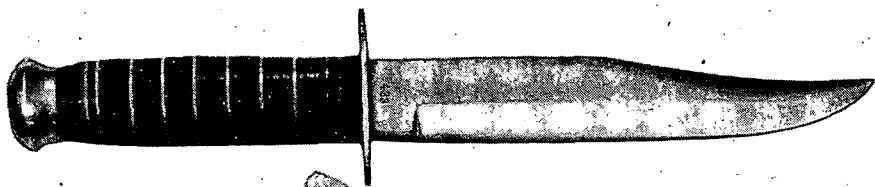
Joe Garagiola, the famous major league catcher who grew up directly across the street from Lawrence "Yogi" Berra, another famous major league catcher.

Joe Shlabotnik, Charlie Brown's favorite baseball player. The trading card with Shlabotnik's picture on it was the one card the boy could never seem to get.

Joe Chill, the small-time hood who gunned down Bruce (Batman) Wayne's mother and father.

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Joe Palooka, the comic-strip boxer.

G.I. Joe; JoJo, the dog-faced boy; Shoeless Joe Jackson. None of them suggested a street name or number.

Danny hastened on to *Ruth*. The only Ruths he could remember were Naomi's devoted daughter-in-law in the Old Testament, Festus's mule in the television series *Gunsmoke*, and Ruth Montgomery, the occult writer. Nothing.

Ruthless? Surely Frank would not have risked his life to transmit the message that his abductor was ruthless. Kidnappers were assumed to be ruthless. Danny chastised himself for wasting time grasping at straws.

His back ached, so he straightened up and stretched. The clock, indifferently observing his progress over his shoulder, read eleven fifty-one. Eighteen minutes, more than half of his time limit, had elapsed, and he had gotten exactly nowhere. Frank was going to die, and it would be Danny's fault.

Inspiration hit Danny. Frank's trivia books—the ones he had been using last night. Of course! The key must be there.

Danny flew into the living room and snatched a handful of trivia books. He ripped through the pages like a madman, searching for buried treasure

under the J's and R's. With stunned horror, Danny discovered that the entries were in alphabetical order by *last* names. He found no Joes at all, and the only new Ruth he unearthed was Babe Ruth, who was a trivia category all by himself.

Worst of all, glancing fearfully into the kitchen, he saw that he had wasted seven precious minutes. It was eleven fifty-eight. He had only five minutes left. Frank had only five minutes left.

The last trivia book, spine irreparably broken now, gave up the ghost and fell from Danny's hand. For the rest of his life, Danny knew he would be carrying the responsibility for Frank's death. How could he live with that? He wanted to throw up his hands. He wanted to punch down the walls. He wanted to sit and cry. He fought back all those urges and ran back to the kitchen.

Joe and Ruth, February 11, 1927. Something would come to him. Something had to. He would not give up.

February 11, 1927. Was it the date and not the names that was significant? No, not 1927, but February eleventh, wasn't that—? Yes! He remembered. February eleventh was George Washington's birthday, according to the Old Style Calendar in use at that time. It had been

changed to the twenty-second in the late 1700's after the calendar was reformed, but Washington himself had always celebrated his birthday on the eleventh.

Could Frank be on Washington Street? Was there a Washington Street somewhere in the city? Refusing to lose the two seconds it would take to look at the clock but knowing his time was almost up, Danny seized the telephone directory and yanked out the city map he kept folded up within its pages. Frantically, his eyes ran down the list of street names while something—was it the clock or his heart?—ticked furiously. W—W. There it was. W. Wallace Drive, Warner Road, Westmoreland Street, Weyler Road. No Washington.

A desperate search of the G's yielded no George street, either.

Nineteen twenty-seven. It was all he had left now to go on. He had no time to deliberate its relevance. Praying he was not making a fatal mistake, Danny dropped the map and grabbed up the telephone directory.

Then the sky fell from the heavens, or so it sounded to Danny. It was the telephone, the kidnapper calling, and Danny was still no closer to a solution.

His fingers, racing in rhythm with his heartbeats, galloped through the phone book. Where

was that thing? Not in the yellow pages. No. Before that.

Again the death bell pealed.

He found it—the table of calendars from 1800 to 2050—and 1927 was a—was a—

The bell sounded a third warning.

—a number seven. Now, February eleventh—February eleventh. Danny struggled to keep his finger on the year 1927, but as the bell rang a fourth time, his hand trembled across centuries.

Danny did his best not to hear the bells ringing. It was like trying to ignore the soundings of Gabriel's trumpet.

Friday! February 11, 1927, was a Friday.

Above the din of heartbeats and death bells, Danny's mind screamed—Joe and Ruth—Friday—Washington. Joe and Ruth—Friday—Washington. Ruth and Joe—Friday—Washington.

The phone rang for the ninth time.

"Seven fourteen Westmoreland Street!" Danny yelled into the mouthpiece.

For an eternity there was nothing but silence from the other end of the line.

Then a gruff voice asked, "How did you do that, Mr. McKyle?" There was a loud thud in the background.

Danny allowed himself to start breathing again. He had

done it. Frank was safe.

"It was a trivial task," said Danny, pulling up a chair to collapse into, "for a Scotsman. Now let me speak to Frank."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Mr. McKyle," the voice growled.

"What do you mean? I won the bet fair and square."

"Yes, you did. But, you see, Mr. Huffton has just fainted."

"I knew you could do it all along, Danny boy," said Frank, glancing up from the trivia book in his lap. "I only fainted because that guy talked so much he used up all the oxygen."

"But I didn't have it, Frank." Danny picked up the flat tam o'shanter on the sofa cushion beside him and tried to fluff it back up. "My subconscious didn't supply the information about Washington's birthplace until just as I picked up the phone. Only then did I remember Washington was born not at Mount Vernon as most people think but fifty miles from there, in Westmoreland County, Virginia. I already knew there was a Westmoreland Street, so I figured that was where you had to be."

"Yeah, well, that was the trickiest part. You probably got the number right off."

"No, not until I found out that

February 11, 1927, was a Friday. Then I knew it had to be seven fourteen. Seven fourteen was the number of home runs Babe Ruth hit, and it was also Joe Friday's badge number on *Dragnet*. Once I knew which Joe and Ruth you were talking about, it wasn't hard to put two and two together."

Frank winked. "And get seven fourteen?"

"What I don't understand," Danny said, "is how you knew February 11, 1927, was a Friday. That's too trivial to be in one of those books."

"I knew that February fourteenth was a Monday. I could never forget that. In 1927, I was in the third grade, and I made my first bet, with the boy who sat next to me. I bet that I would get the fewest valentines of anyone in the class. And I won; I didn't get any. That was one of the greatest days in my life. Say—here's one for you: What was the Cleavers' address in the television series *Leave It to Beaver*?" Frank read.

"Two eleven Pine Street."

"That's great, Danny boy. You've got a real gift, you know that?"

"I suppose. I just hope I never have to use it again like I did today."

Frank laughed. "I'll bet."

"The hell you will."

The Mountain Mishap Mystery

by James A. Noble



“I hope the reader will forgive us,” began Thatch. “Winnie and I were supposed to begin this mystery at precisely this time. Unfortunately, Winnie is late and I haven’t the slightest notion where . . . Just a moment.” Thatch turned and listened. “I think I hear someone coming. Perhaps it is she.”

“Thatch,” called Winnie from

the foyer. “I need your help.”

“Pardon me,” said Thatch, going to her assistance. Winnie was standing, or rather supporting herself, on crutches at the entranceway. Her left ankle was bandaged, and she was carrying her purse and a dripping-wet high heeled shoe, minus the heel.

“What on earth. . . ?” started Thatch.

"Explanation later, help now," interrupted Winnie.

Thatch took her purse and the damaged shoe and carefully assisted her to her chair. He slid a hassock over and gently lowered her bandaged ankle on it.

"It's not broken, is it?" asked Thatch, the concern showing on his face.

"Just a bad sprain, dear. Dr. Morly X-rayed it and drove me home. Oh, look at my pump. It's ruined."

"You still have a good right one," said Thatcher, trying a bit of levity. "You'll be able to make some mean left-hand turns."

It didn't work.

"Seriously, Thatch. They're my best shoes. Do you think you can save it? I have the heel," she said, reaching into her pocket and handing it to him.

Thatch looked it over. "It broke off cleanly. I should think the cobbler will have no problem reattaching it to the shoe."

"But the leather will crack when it dries."

"We'll take care of that right now." Thatch went over to his desk and removed a small tin and a cloth. "Saddle soap. Best thing for it."

"Thatch, you're a lifesaver."

"So now that that's settled, would you like to tell me what happened?" asked Thatch, rub-

bing the saddle soap on the shoe.

"I was up at Calvin Huskett's mountain estate looking for clues. He was killed in an apparent accident."

"Well, it's little wonder you injured your ankle. Imagine traipsing about that rough countryside in high heels. I should think you would have known better."

That stirred Winnie's ire. "I'll have you know I did not go tramping about the hillsides. The Huskett estate could hardly be called a log cabin in the middle of the woods.

"As a matter of fact, I turned my ankle while I was walking down the driveway to the cliff. I stepped in one of those holes... what do you call them?"

"A manhole?"

"No, no. I mean those holes that always make you cuss like a drill sergeant whenever you run over one in the car."

"Of course," said Thatch, chuckling. "You mean a pot-hole."

"That's it."

"So why were you going to a cliff?"

"That's how Calvin Huskett was killed. But let me start at the beginning.

"I may as well tell you now. I haven't figured out this mystery yet. I'm going to need all

the help you can give me, especially since it involves a car. You know how little I know about cars."

"At your service," replied Thatch, setting the polished shoe on the floor.

"Calvin was a widower," began Winnie. "Having no children, he was planning to leave the whole of his estate to his favorite nephew, Julius Barker.

"Now, Calvin disapproved of Julius's rather wild, expensive lifestyle and decided to get together with the young man to talk things over. You know, man to man. Obviously he was hoping to convince Julius to settle down and be a little more responsible.

"Normally Calvin stays at his penthouse in the city and doesn't go to his mountain estate until late summer. Wanting to talk to Julius undisturbed, and because it has been such a mild spring thus far, Calvin decided to use the mountain estate. Since it was only going to be for a few days, Calvin left the house staff back in the city. He did, however, send his cook to stock the shelves with a few necessities and to take food from the freezer to thaw so they would have something to eat.

"When Calvin and Julius arrived yesterday, the cook returned to the city, leaving the

two to fend for themselves as planned.

"The following day, today that is, the two men ran out of liquor, and Julius left in his car to go down to a general store about thirty minutes from the house. He arrived at the store at one thirty. The store owner is certain about that, since Julius asked him for the time.

"After picking up what he needed, Julius was sidetracked to a small bar in the back of the store where some of the locals hang out. He ended up playing pool with one of the men there and lost all track of the time.

"At exactly a quarter till three, while Julius was in the middle of his second pool game, several people at a roadside lookout, who had a clear view of a particularly nasty part of the driveway leading down from the estate, saw Calvin Huskett's car fail to negotiate a sharp left-hand turn and drive straight over a high cliff about thirty feet from the shoulder of the drive. Many of the witnesses clearly described Calvin as the man behind the wheel.

"Using their CB radios, they relayed a call to the police, who didn't arrive until nearly an hour later because of the remoteness of the area.

"It was almost six o'clock before the car and the body of Calvin Huskett were pulled from

the ravine. That was also the approximate time they located Julius, still playing pool at the bar.

"By eight o'clock, I got the coroner's preliminary report. He set the time of death at about three o'clock, give or take a half hour. That means he died about the time of the accident.

"Cause of death was a crushed skull due, it was believed, to the car's having landed on its roof at the bottom of the cliff."

"Just a minute," interrupted Thatch. "How did you get privy to the coroner's report? And what were you doing around the Huskett estate anyway?"

"Well, Dr. Morly just happens to be the acting coroner for this area, and since I was in his office having my ankle looked at, I just couldn't help but notice his report."

Thatch eyed Winnie suspiciously. "Couldn't help, eh?"

"It was right there in front of me. I couldn't avoid it."

"On his desk?"

"Actually . . . it was in a folder."

"And . . ." prompted Thatch.

" . . . in his file cabinet."

Thatch could only shake his head. "Answer my other question. What were you doing at the Huskett estate?"

"I pointed out a few strange facts to the police, and they were impressed enough to ask

me to help in the investigation. I do have a reputation for my attention to detail."

"I think it's called being nos. . ." Thatch caught himself just in time to avoid grisly consequences. "What sort of details did you notice?"

"Well, for one thing, there were the tire tracks and the witnesses' testimony. Many of them stated that Calvin drove the car straight down the driveway and over the cliff. He didn't make any attempt at all to negotiate the sharp left turn. The tire imprints in the dirt just off the road verified that.

"Not only that, there weren't any skid marks indicating the brakes were ever used."

Thatcher stroked his chin thoughtfully. "That suggests the car might have been tampered with."

"I thought so, too," said Winnie. "But I was proved incorrect when the car was pulled from the ravine. It had landed on its roof and the rear trunk area, so most of it was still fairly intact. The steering and brake systems both worked perfectly. Little wonder. Look what I found in the glove compartment." Winnie reached in her purse and removed several yellow forms which she handed to Thatch.

"Receipts from an auto repair shop," noted Thatch. "A very reputable one at that. From the

looks of this extensive list, I'd say the car was thoroughly checked out and serviced. Lubrication, brakes, wheel alignment, heater, and air conditioning. . . . It was even washed and waxed."

"And look at who signed the authorization for the work," said Winnie.

"Julius Barker. And just three days ago, too."

"Right. I asked Julius about it. He claimed he had the car thoroughly serviced because his uncle neglected it so terribly."

"Did Julius make a habit of taking care of his uncle's car?"

Winnie shook her head. "Apparently not. This is the only time I can determine he did it."

Thatch set the forms on the coffee table. "If the car was in good condition, why couldn't Calvin avoid the accident?"

"I think Calvin Huskett was already dead before the car went over the cliff," said Winnie, reaching for her knitting next to the chair. "Someone could have bashed him, set his body in the car, pointed it down the drive to the sharp turn and the cliff, and let him go. The driveway inclines down to the cliff, you know."

"That someone certainly wasn't Julius Barker," said Thatcher. "He was in the store and the bar long before the time the car went over the cliff. Sev-

eral people saw him there."

"I know," sighed Winnie. "But he did it. I'm sure of it. He was the only one who would benefit from his uncle's death. I just don't completely understand how he did it."

"You've worked out some partial theories, then?"

"Weak ones at best. I had Huskett's cook come up to the estate to look at the contents of the chest freezer. I suspected something when I noticed that although most of the items in it were very neatly organized, some frozen foods were scattered about haphazardly. The cook verified he always kept the contents very orderly and that someone had displaced some of the items."

"A weak theory indeed. Calvin or Julius might not have liked the items the cook had left out earlier and were simply searching for something else to thaw for a meal. Was the unused space in the freezer large enough for a body?" asked Thatch.

"Yes."

Thatcher nodded understandingly. "Now I see what you're leading up to. You're trying to figure out why the coroner placed the time of death a full hour and a half or more after Julius left. You checked the freezer because you figured Julius put the body into it to

give it a good chill before he stuck it behind the wheel of the car. After he left, some time expired before the temperature of the body returned to that of the surrounding air. The deterioration would have been slowed enough to convince the coroner that Calvin had died after Julius had left."

"Well, what do you think?" asked Winnie curiously.

"I suggest you try again. Any other ideas?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," replied Winnie. "Have you noticed how unseasonably mild the weather has been lately?"

Thatcher laughed loudly and slapped his knee. "Decided to talk about the weather, have you? Mystery's got you stumped, eh?"

"Just answer the question."

"Very well," said Thatch, still chuckling. "Yes, it has been mild. As a matter of fact, the weather has been beautiful. Clear skies and sunny days — nearly perfect weather."

"Both in the city and the mountains. Correct?"

"Yes," agreed Thatch.

"I happened to notice the air conditioner in Mr. Huskett's car had been set on full blast before the wreck left it inoperative. Now why would Calvin have the air conditioner on when we haven't had a warm day since early last fall?"

"Something could have hit the air conditioner button when the car impacted at the bottom of the cliff," suggested Thatch.

Winnie smiled slightly. "Your turn to try again. The temperature setting was on 'cold,' the blower fan was on 'high,' and all the windows had been rolled up. The impact could hardly have done all that."

"I thought the car landed on its roof. The windows would have been all smashed out. How do you know they were all closed?"

"My goodness, Thatch. I think your mind has deserted you. I checked the window crank handles, of course."

"Oh . . . of course."

"As you noted," continued Winnie, "the weather has been fairly cool. With the air conditioner running full blast in the closed car, it must have gotten quite cold inside. Enough to delay the deterioration of the body to make the coroner believe Calvin had died in the wreck after Julius had left."

"So another possibility is that Julius put Calvin's body in the car and turned on the air conditioner before he left." Thatcher picked up the yellow repair forms from the coffee table.

"Have you got something?" asked Winnie.

"Yes. Julius had the check-out of the air conditioner at the

top of his list of items to service." Thatch paused to think. "You didn't, by chance, check to see if the engine was warm when it was pulled from the ravine, did you?"

"Yes, I did," said Winnie, realizing Thatch was on a roll. "It was quite warm."

"And that was a few hours after the accident," said Thatch. "If Calvin had simply gotten into his car, started it, and driven over the cliff, the engine wouldn't have had any time at all to warm up. It must have been running for quite a while before it went over the cliff in order for it still to be warm hours later. Winnie, I think we're onto it."

"Why, Thatch, you old devil. A remarkable bit of logic."

He sighed deeply. "Only one problem. How did Julius run the car over the cliff when he was miles away at the bar?"

Winnie shifted uneasily in her chair.

"Was the transmission in gear when you looked at the wreck?" asked Thatch.

"Transmission in gear?" asked Winnie, lifting her injured leg to a more comfortable position on the hassock.

"I was referring to the shift lever."

"Oh yes. It was in 'drive.'"

"Hmm, an automatic transmission," mumbled Thatch.

"Beg your pardon, dear?" asked Winnie, adjusting the hassock some more.

"Oh, nothing. Is your ankle troubling you?"

"I'm afraid so. I wonder if I should..." Suddenly Winnie fell silent.

Thatcher looked over at her. She obviously had thought of something.

"Winnie? ... What is it?"

"I've solved it. I know how Julius killed his uncle. The answer is right under our noses," she said excitedly.

"It is?"

"Yes. My shoe."

"Your shoe?" Thatcher picked up the broken shoe from the floor. "I don't understand."

"Think, Thatch. How did my shoe get wet?"

"You already explained that. You stepped into a pothole and twisted your ankle. Obviously the pothole was filled with water."

"But we both agreed that the weather has been mild and clear for the last several days. Specifically, it hasn't rained. So how did the water get into the pothole?"

Thatch opened his mouth to say something, but quickly snapped it shut.

"Don't you see?" said Winnie. "It explains everything. Now I understand why Julius killed his uncle on the second day in-

stead of the first, why the contents of the freezer were disturbed, and especially how the water got into the pothole."

"Well, I don't."

"Julius did something in the freezer all right, but he wasn't cooling a body. He was making a block of ice."

"A block of ice?"

"Well, maybe not a block, but some sort of large piece of ice, perhaps in a bucket or a wastebasket. He had to wait a day for it to freeze solid."

"What on earth did he do that for?"

"Julius murdered his uncle and put his body behind the steering wheel after he set the car on the incline leading down the driveway to the cliff. He used the block of ice like a chock under one of the wheels of the car; then he turned on the air conditioner, started the engine, and shifted the car into 'drive.' With the wheel blocked, the car couldn't move. Afterwards, he took his own car and drove off to the general store to establish his alibi."

Thatch wasn't totally convinced. "A car in drive and on an incline would push a block of ice out of the way quite easily."

"Not if it was wedged be-

tween the tire and a pothole," noted Winnie. "But let me continue."

"An hour and a half after Julius left, the ice melted sufficiently for the tire to hop over it and release the car. And what do the witnesses at the roadside lookout see? A stone-cold Calvin Huskett driving his car straight over the cliff."

"Good show, dear," shouted Thatch approvingly. "Now I understand even more clearly why the engine was still warm several hours after it crashed. With the air conditioner on, the transmission in gear, and the engine idling, it must have gotten red hot."

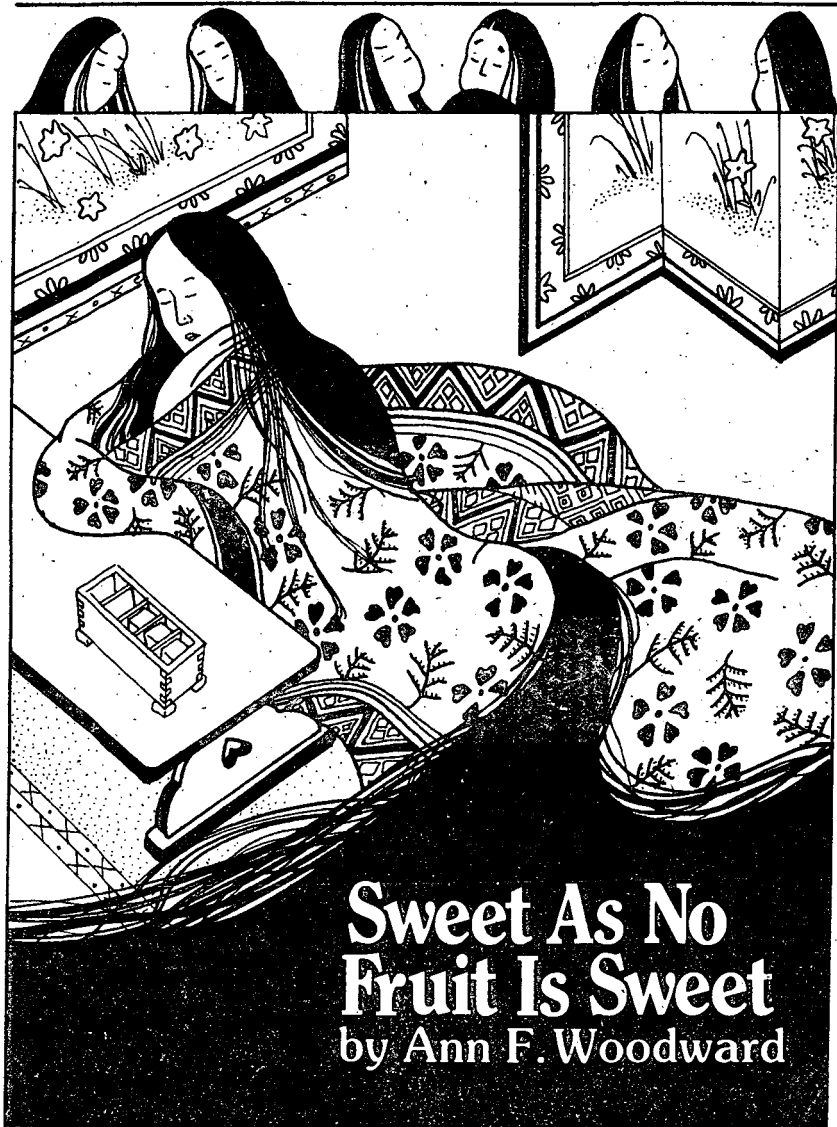
Winnie gave Thatch a confused look. "I thought an air conditioner was supposed to cool. Why would the engine overheat?"

Thatcher sighed. "You see, dear, the engine must drive a compressor, that is, if its clutch is engaged by a . . . Oh, never mind," said Thatch, realizing he was about to start a losing battle. "Just remind me to explain to you how a car works sometime."

Winnie returned to her knitting. "That will be nice."

Thatch shuddered in anticipation.

FICTION



Sweet As No Fruit Is Sweet

by Ann F. Woodward

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

When the message came from the empress, the carriage was so splendid that even the princess' disciplined servants came in twos and threes along the gallery near the gate to watch it being pulled across the courtyard. Gold, lacquer, and green brocade gathered the meagre light of a cloudy day, making color and luster vivid. Broad black wheels as tall as a man ground against the sand as the outriders pulled on the traces and turned at the right moment to put the back opening just at the gallery's edge. Beyond the outer gate, the unyoked ox stamped and shook his loose-skinned neck, and the red tassels on his harness flew in small arcs. Propping the traces on a stand, the men hurried to steady the wheels as the bamboo screen of the rear opening began to roll upward. Waiting only long enough to see the many edges of the lady's sleeve, the servants left quietly, three of them to inform the princess that there was a visitor from the palace. By the time the lady stepped out, two ladies-in-waiting were there to receive her. The wind shook through their robes as they hurried along the open corridor toward the shelter of the north wing. Rain in small stinging drops blew after them.

The princess waited almost in darkness, her ladies kneeling beside her, dim light from the crosshatched grating of the garden doors sifting over their robes of winter colors. The Lady Aoi, whose outer robe was deep blue, felt that such light made even red seem dull. When the doors slid open to admit the palace visitor, her plum, white, and violet flared briefly as she bowed and moved to the place of honor and bowed again. When she was still, even that richness was damped.

The lady was one of the empress' oldest women, one who had served her during the first nine years of her marriage, when the emperor had been crown prince, and who was now trusted with the management of the most intimate details of the empress' household. She was well known here, and Aoi could see the princess smile as she bowed in greeting. Cakes were brought, and hot wine, pleasant news was exchanged while they all waited to learn the purpose of the call. Finally, with many apologies for insisting on privacy, the lady, who was called Naka no Ben, asked to speak to Aoi.

In the quiet of her room, warmed by a brazier of brightly glowing charcoal, Aoi received into her hands a letter from the empress, who had been her friend for years.

Perhaps you have heard what is happening here. I am too distressed for sleep or even rest. Please come.

Ah, Aoi thought, I had not known it was so bad.

In the early fall, the father of the empress, who had been head of the government, had died with many others in an epidemic of the shaking sickness. The new prime minister was an unusually ambitious man. He had at once sent his daughter to the emperor as concubine, and within three weeks she was raised to Imperial Consort. Aoi had heard rumors of her arrogance and of trouble between her people and those who served the empress. Among the women, always jealous of position and favor, such conflict was not unusual. But she could not imagine the empress, who was wise, mature, and well-established in her husband's affection, being distressed by the strivings of a girl.

"Of course I am willing," Aoi said to Naka no Ben, "but we must first ask permission of the princess."

Naka no Ben began to weep. "I never thought to see such things. I don't know how he can treat her so!"

He? thought Aoi. Has the emperor then contributed to the problem? Or does she mean the prime minister?

"We have had to dismiss one woman because she was provoked beyond endurance and responded violently."

Aoi's surprise was evident.

"Oh, there have been sly tricks, spiteful words, and things thrown. It is quite unbelievable. But I promised the empress that I would not tell you all these disgraceful things. She asked me to be sure to bring you back with me. She trusts your judgment, and she longs for your comforting potions and massage."

Asking the princess was really only a formality. Aoi said that the empress was finding the winter dreary and needed fresh companionship. The princess said that she would miss Aoi but that she could not deny a royal request. Both of them knew that while they spoke Aoi's woman servant, O-hana, was folding robes into a straw box and tying cords around the wooden chest of scrolls that accompanied Aoi everywhere. Within an hour Aoi was stepping into the sumptuous carriage, brushing rain from her shoulders and making herself comfortable for the short ride to the palace.

When they arrived, the pages, as soon as they learned from Naka no Ben who it was who accompanied her, left with unusual haste and returned to intercept Aoi as she was on her way to the room

in which she would sleep. "Please, you are wanted at once."

She had hoped to change her robes and tidy her hair, but she nodded to O-hana and followed the little boy. This whole afternoon seemed to Aoi to have about it an air of emergency as of accident or illness.

The empress sat with many ladies in the largest room of her apartments. Aoi's arrival caused them all to move toward her, greeting her with musical politeness, urging her toward an empty cushion next to their mistress. Some of them Aoi knew, but not the younger ones. She could sense the well-bred concealment of interest among those who were meeting her for the first time, and she sighed inwardly. It was always the same. Is this the woman who is said to be so strangely educated, they were thinking, who drops her Chinese poems about to impress people, who spends time every day reading scrolls like a man, who knows magic and medical secrets? Aoi hoped that they would also think that, even if all this were true, she looked like a refined person, not lacking in manners and pleasing to see. It's strange, she thought, how I never get used to this. I am always resentful when I see their sliding eyes and little smiles. After a deep bow at the doorway, she approached the empress.

In the shadowy light, lines and hollows in the empress' face seemed darker, her eyes more lit with restlessness and worry. Aoi suppressed an immediate sharp concern. To show that she saw evidence of the effect of a difficult situation would be to imply that her friend was not sufficiently in charge of her own affairs.

"What depressing weather!" she said.

The empress laughed, but it was too short, too quickly cut off.

"Ah, yes, you must rescue me from the boredom of being shut up for weeks with no new faces and no . . ." The empress' eyes wandered away to the corners of the room, and she did not complete the sentence. One of her ladies quickly supplied the rest.

"Yes, we are all tired of poetry and romances and backgammon, we need fresh ideas." She looked uncomfortably at the others, afraid she had come too near the truth. Further entanglement was avoided by the appearance of the evening meal, brought by two serious serving ladies. Seeing the tray-stands being pushed in at the doorway, the empress suddenly sat straighter and spoke in a strong voice.

"Now all of you leave me, I must speak with the Lady Aoi."

"But who will serve you?" they asked.

"She will serve me, of course. Just put everything here."

After vigorous protest, they all left the room and slid shut the hallway doors, two of them returning to bring tall lamps, for darkness was already beginning.

"They protect me too much. It is time for me to face my trouble. I will tell you everything, and you must help me decide what to do." As she spoke, the empress grasped her chopsticks and held them stiffly in front of her, as if they were an emblem of her resolve. Aoi, speaking softly, poured wine and urged her to drink, chose small dishes and insisted that she finish them. The empress eventually attacked the food, eating hastily between sentences, occasionally flipping away some small bit with decisive rejection, once in her agitation even clicking the ivory sticks against her teeth. She spoke, finally, with freedom and trust.

When the girl first arrived, she was welcomed with a gift and a few notes from the empress, who was not in residence at the palace but was staying with her mother. Since the empress was in mourning for her father, she was not expected to do much for her husband's new concubine. Because she was not at the palace, she did not hear of the plans of the new prime minister and was taken by surprise when she was told that the new girl would soon be Second Empress. Shortly before the ceremony installing her—the empress never mentioned her name, which Aoi knew to be Tamiko—the empress returned to her quarters and expected that her husband would come from his part of the palace to welcome her home and to inquire if she were feeling less sad, after her father's sudden death. He came as expected, accompanied by three chamberlains, a Middle Counselor, and two captains of the guard, who crowded with him into her presence, all expressing sympathy and all a little manic with some inner excitement. They stayed for a short time, hardly long enough for her women to serve refreshments, and left all together. The women said that, instead of turning back toward the emperor's residence, they passed along a covered corridor that led farther into the northeast corner of the grounds, a certain boisterousness breaking out among them almost at once. It was to the new concubine that they went, and it was two days before they left. All this was reported by the empress' faithful ladies-in-waiting.

"Perhaps it is my fault," the empress said. "For so long we were close, all during those waiting years. We had so much to hope for." Aoi understood this as an explanation of many things. Hope and

waiting often bring more happiness than does achieving. "But now," the empress went on, "he is emperor, I was away, and she is a beautiful young girl, they say, lively and full of wiles, they say, and he wants . . ." Unable to go on speaking, she busied herself with the separation of a serving of beans, so that she could pick them up one by one. He wants all the things an emperor can have, Aoi finished in her mind.

"But," said the empress, and she waved the chopsticks in a frantic circle, behavior she never would have allowed herself with others, "does he have to pass by here so cheerfully on his way to her? Does he have to bring a whole party of others every time, and laugh and sing into the night so that we cannot help hearing?"

"*Ara!*" Aoi said, surprised. The empress looked directly at her, leaning forward, her cheeks trembling. "He passes just beyond that door," she said.

Aoi turned to see the wide door panels, even moving to open one of them slightly and look out. She saw that the empress meant not the corridor immediately outside her room but one across a small courtyard, a sort of bridge between buildings, roofed and partially enclosed on the sides. She delayed a little, to give her friend time to settle her emotions. When she returned to the constellation of lacquered tables on legs and her duty of serving wine and presenting dishes, the empress had laid aside her chopsticks and sat gazing to one side, her hands pushed into her sleeves, her arms hugging close.

"Even that I could have borne." Her voice was low and deep. She sighed. "Her women are all from good families, but they have behaved like children." She leaned farther to one side, her chin sunk against her shoulder. "They have driven nails into the corridor, so that we tore our robes, disgusting things have been left at our doors, they pass nearby in large groups and taunt us . . ." Her voice almost disappeared. "You know the kind of thing."

"Yes, yes. It only discredits them."

"My ladies were furious, of course, and began to respond. I told them not to, forbade them to behave even impolitely. Then one of them—you know her, the daughter of the governor of Shinano—met the emperor at a corner of the hall. She was bringing me barley tea. As he passed, one of his men caught her sleeve and asked why she didn't move to livelier quarters. She threw the tea at him, tray and all. It splashed on the emperor, and he had to turn around and go back to change his clothes." With not a shadow of amusement

on her face, the empress shook her head. "It was inexcusable, we had to send her home."

Aoi remembered the governor's daughter as a young woman of almost startling beauty, her features richly turned, her hair thick and slightly waved, worn long as all women of high birth wore it and trailing a little on the floor behind her. Her taste in color was a little too lush, for which she was criticized. The criticism held a tinge of envy, for scarlet satin or starched yellow gauze made her all the more striking.

"She was bitter about it," the empress said. "I could not make her understand that her behavior had lowered me, in my own eyes if not for others." She was silent for a while. "I hate to let him know how much that girl has upset us all. Someday he will come here again, and he must not find us resentful."

Aoi murmured agreement.

"Well, I think now she has caught a cold or something. At least, so my women say. And it has been quiet for a whole day, so I have had time to think and I thought of you."

The empress stopped speaking and smiled at Aoi. There was less tension in her face, a smoothing of lines. "My dear friend," she said, and then gasped. "But how rude I have been. I have not even offered you wine." Aoi quickly shook her head and began setting aside the little tables. There was, of course, no extra cup.

"It is I who am rude," she said. "You must be tired and look how dark it is! Shall I mix you something to help you sleep?"

"I am so relieved to have you here that I am sure I will rest tonight. Just stay a while and massage my shoulders."

The next day, at Aoi's suggestion, the empress sent for a winter melon, had it wrapped in textured white paper and braced about with a framework and handle woven of thin bamboo strips. She wrote a short note on paper of fresh green.

We have heard that you are ill.

A page was sent for and directed to take the heavy melon to the young mistress and to be careful with it. He brought back a short note of thanks.

The empress then wrote to her husband, spending a long time with her brush held above the paper, undecided and tense. Finally she stroked briefly, then folded the paper narrowly, twisting hard

at the ends to keep the folds together, and tied it with a length of blue cord. This she entrusted to Naka no Ben to deliver, saying to Aoi, "I have just mentioned that you are here. He may want to see you." The wistfulness of this made Aoi's eyes spring with tears, and she bowed low to hide her face.

At midday rain fell and then turned to snow, which at first dissolved on the wet ground, then collected heavy and gray in clumps between stones and on leaves. The wind rose, and when they looked out they saw that the clouds were breaking up, forming into tall drifts that were almost black, moving fast. The snow stopped. They had one door opened at the top half and sat throughout the afternoon, watching the sky and talking of old times. The ladies-in-waiting, sensing Aoi's healing purpose in this return to earlier days, were subdued, offering small comments or laughing in remembrance.

Sometime deep in the night Aoi woke, wondering what had disturbed her. She could hear the wind passing in buffeting gusts and at first nothing else. But it was the drumming of heels on wooden floors that had wakened her, perhaps more by vibration than by sound, and it was soon felt or heard again. She sat up, and when her own door was approached, she was on her knees, pulling her quilt close about her and shivering.

"Yes, what is it?" She spoke even before the door was opened. Naka no Ben slid back the left-hand panel and answered her, "Please come at once, oh, quickly, quickly!"

Aoi reached for a short coat that would keep her warm and held it over her shoulders as they hurried along the corridor. "The emperor has sent for you." Naka no Ben was almost running, and her words were hard to hear. "He says you must try to help her."

"Who? Is the empress ill?"

"Yes, the Second Empress. She is suddenly worse."

"Are you sure they want me?"

"The doctors will come, but you are closest. My mistress urges you to go."

Aoi followed her guide, lifting her feet quickly from the cold polished boards of the corridors as they crossed from the empress' quarters to a large building just to the north. Here some of the ladies-in-waiting slept and there were rooms for visitors. Beyond that, in a small house set almost in the back corner of the palace enclosure, the Second Empresses always lived. Through the white paper that covered the windows of the passages, cold light fell. The

clouds must have opened enough to let the moon shine through. Every window and door panel rattled and whistled as the wind surged.

Aoi was never to forget the scene in the main room of the young empress' house. All the lamps were collected behind the thin red curtains of the raised sleeping platform in the center, so that this enclosed rectangle glowed in surrounding dark. The curtain itself swayed and stirred as the wind's huge presence swept through the night. Within the curtains, one voice groaned and wailed, the sound of a woman in pain. Under this anguished crying, there was the nervous chatter of several other voices, as the Second Empress' ladies tried to ease her. As Aoi approached the curtains, a chamberlain from the emperor's quarters stepped beside her and thanked her for coming.

"How fortunate that you are visiting at just this time! Those women—" he nodded toward the lighted platform, "though there is hardly a one you could call a woman, they are all so young—have no idea what to do. Please come."

He found the opening in the curtain and spoke to the nearest person inside, explaining who Aoi was and that the emperor had asked her to come. The lady to whom he spoke turned to the next lady and soon the solid line of attendants opened a space at their mistress' bedside and Aoi could see all their troubled young faces and the figure of the Second Empress, lying with her sleeve pulled across her head. The pitiful thin voice was saying, "Oh, oh, oh, oh."

Moving slowly, Aoi touched the rich cherry-colored silk under which lay the young empress' arm. As the arm moved, it at first trembled, then was still, trembling again before the next move. Aoi stroked gently and pulled aside the sleeve, speaking softly the whole time, explaining who she was and that something must be done to help. She called the empress by name, a boldness that caused the others to gasp but captured the attention of the distraught patient.

"Who are you?" she asked sharply. Then in panic, "I don't know you!" and trembling and screaming irritably, she turned away, clutching her sleeve across her face, twisting on the bed mats.

Aoi sat back and looked around for Naka no Ben. "We cannot have so many people here. Take them away, if you can. And take away the lamps, all but one."

When the ladies-in-waiting had moved outside the curtains and the light had been softened, Aoi sat close beside the pitiful huddled

shape on the bed and coaxed and stroked until the young empress straightened and uncovered her face.

Ill and upset, the Second Empress was not beautiful. Her face was pale, the mouth a shocking ashen gray, her features twisted, her eyes glittering, her breath coming in rapid pants. Aoi found a basin of cool water nearby and sent for one of the women to return and bathe her mistress' face. While they sat together calming her, Aoi asked questions.

"How long have you had this pain?"

The empress would not answer, only tried to hide again. So Aoi turned to the lady-in-waiting.

"She became ill two or three days ago, she had a cold, we thought. Some fever, yes, but just the usual symptoms—her head ached and she sneezed a lot. Then her throat hurt and that got worse until she could hardly swallow. But this," she stroked with the cool cloth, holding her other hand in front of her and causing it to tremble, "suddenly this afternoon the tremor began and terrible pain in her stomach. She has that unnatural color and she says her mouth is sore and tastes of metal. All this has made her afraid and we have hardly known how to help her."

"Has she had medicines?"

"Only the usual things, seaweed soup, ginseng tea. And then the empress," she paused and glanced at Aoi, "the *old* empress, sent those marvelous fruits, and we were sure they would cause her illness to disappear."

"Fruits?"

"We thought perhaps you had brought them, the Fruits of Blissful Unending Life."

"Unh?"

"That's what the Chinese writing said. We asked one of the guards."

Aoi felt a small shock which tightened her throat and chest.

"These fruits, I must see them. Did she take one?"

"Yes, only one."

"Are there any left?"

"Just a moment, they are here."

The girl laid aside the cloth and went to a small chest at one side of the platform. Opening a drawer, she took out a box and looked inside. "There is one but there should be three," she said, handing the box to Aoi across the restless form of the Second Empress.

The box was not unusual, made of closely joined light wood and darkened at the corners and edges from handling. Inside were five divisions, only one of them now filled with a square white box. Aoi took out this small box and removed the lid, finding inside a smooth cover of stretched white paper which sealed in the contents and on which were written fine red Chinese letters. Aoi made her own translation.

Blissful Fruit of Eternal Life

Ah, those wicked Taoists, she thought. Every civilized person knows to beware of their medicines, especially this one.

"You say the empress sent this? I would say that that is impossible. She would never have anything to do with these."

The girl's face hardened. She turned back to the drawer and took from it a folded note, opening it for Aoi to read.

We have heard that you are ill.

It was written in the empress' handwriting, and the paper was light green.

"You know that this came with a melon," Aoi said.

Triumphant and malicious, the girl picked up another note and showed it to her. It was exactly like the first. Aoi frowned in puzzlement but, feeling the need for haste, turned again to the white box in her hand.

The covering paper lifted easily and under that was a bed of scarlet tissue silk with, seated in a depression in the center, a cleverly folded wrapping of white paper. She lifted it out, noticing even in her haste the light powderiness of mica-pounded paper, the crispness of its pleats. It opened in her palm like a fragile shell, revealing the last wrapping of thin gold paper. A touch caused this to loosen and unfold. Inside was the Taoist "fruit."

Round and slightly pointed, indented with a faint seam, it was not the shape of any one fruit. Set into a dimple at the top were a stem and leaf of gold, soft and delicate. It was red and gold in equal parts, those parts just slightly swirled into one another, the tracings of red on gold and gold on red as just and sweetly trailed as brushstrokes. A faint swelling of one side larger than the other held a glow of reflected light, the red pure and warm. Aoi felt her hand drawn to hold it, her tongue cupping to feel its weight, her

whole being longing to know its taste.

The lady-in-waiting had leaned forward and was gazing into the nest of wrappings, her eyes intent and her hand hovering near. "Isn't it beautiful?" she said. "And the taste is like, like . . ."

"You had one, too?"

The girl did not look up. "Yes. To test it." She raised her head for a moment to glance at Aoi. "We are not careless, we do not give our mistress anything from outside without taking precautions." Aoi let pass this reference to the First Empress as "outside." With such tension between the two households, perhaps it was justified. She looked at the girl, seeing her calmness, the hand near the box held without tremor. The girl continued speaking, her hand moving nearer, all her attention now on the fruit of red and gold.

"It melts at once and has the taste of . . ." she seemed almost to lose the thread of her sentence ". . . sweetness, and of pepper, was it pepper? I have tasted pepper and it is like that, I think. But sweet like no . . ."

Aoi withdrew her hand and refolded the gold paper and the white shell, breaking the spell of the girl's longing.

"When did you take it?" Aoi asked.

"This afternoon. I had one and my mistress had one. I don't know what has happened to the other two."

"But you have had no effect like this?"

"No." The girl began to cry, taking the damp cloth and returning to her soothing. The young empress, too, was crying now and twisting almost unmanageably. As she moved to calm her, Aoi was considering what she could do.

In one corner of her chest of scrolls was a box stocked with herbs and medicines, among them a twist of paper holding red orpiment, which was said to act against all poisons. Aoi was sure that the Taoist fruit was made of cinnabar and gold, the ancient formula of the alchemists for the draught of eternal life. Poisonous cinnabar! Would reason and good sense never put down superstition? She dared not use her medicines, since she was already suspected of supplying the red and gold fruits. Beckoning to one of the women outside the curtained enclosure, she sent for milk or, if that could not be found, rice gruel.

Suddenly the young empress looked at Aoi.

"Is it the shaking sickness?" she said.

"No," said Aoi. "That is different, more fever, no sore throat, the shaking is all over and it does not stop."

"I tremble like an old woman. But I am young! They say I will now live forever. But not like this!"

Men's voices could be heard in the distance, and the sounds of doors and footsteps.

"Try not to worry. The doctors are coming."

It was the prime minister who entered first, moving at once to his daughter's side, holding her hands when he saw how unmanageable they were. Two physicians who always served in the palace followed. They greeted Aoi perfunctorily.

"Can you tell us what has happened?" one of them said. Aoi described the beginning of the illness, as it had been told to her, then showed him the fruit in its wrappings.

"She took one of these this afternoon."

"What is it?"

"It is Taoist," Aoi said, showing him the writing on the box lid.

"But how did it come here?"

"There are always exotic things sent to the palace, though I do not believe these came from the palace." Aoi spoke carefully, not mentioning the empress.

"You have not given her anything?" His tone was not friendly.

"I sent for milk," said Aoi. "It has not yet been brought."

The physician turned to his assistant, who knelt outside the curtains beside a pair of wooden boxes with many drawers. "Red orpiment, mixed with wine," he said. "And bring me that milk when it comes."

Aoi stayed to help. The young Second Empress became more and more violently ill and died before the sun rose. Her father, when told of the suspicious fruits and the note that had come with them, found in Aoi a focus for his grief and rage and sent her away.

Sharp cold struck at them as Aoi and Naka no Ben entered the corridors between buildings, on their way to the empress. There was gray light now behind the windows, and as they crossed an open bridge they paused to see the pearl and azure in the east. Under the bridge, little shelves of fragile ice rimmed the stones in the garden stream. Aoi felt that the cold air had swept away a steam of confusion that had plagued her in the sickroom, and she wondered why she had not acted at once to protect the empress. Thinking back, she decided that she had done all she could but that much more must be done and at once. Detaining Naka no Ben in her haste to return to her mistress, Aoi asked her to delay for a while and consult with her.

"But she will be waiting. And someone else might tell her what has happened."

"Yes, that is true. Go to her and tell her that the young empress is dead. But do not mention the notes or the fruits. Then come to me quickly."

In her own room, Aoi found O-hana waiting beside the door. She had made a hot fire in the brazier and she had a robe warming beside it, which she wrapped around Aoi. She asked no questions.

"There is only one possible way it could have happened," Aoi said to her, speaking her thoughts aloud. "I will need your help," and she sent O-hana to ask discreet questions among the Second Empress' servants.

When Naka no Ben returned, Aoi drew her urgently to a cushion beside the brazier.

"We must do this quickly, before the story goes too far. There were two notes, so there must have been two people who were ill."

Naka no Ben looked at Aoi helplessly. "I don't understand."

"I am sorry, I should explain. The Second Empress' lady-in-waiting showed me two notes from the empress. Both of them said, 'We have heard that you are ill.' She says that one note came with the melon, the other with some poisonous medicine, which is almost surely what caused the young empress to die."

"But the empress sent only the melon."

"Yes, of course. Now tell me. When someone is ill and she sends a gift, does she usually write just that simple phrase, 'We have heard that you are ill'?"

Naka no Ben considered. "I don't always know what she writes but I think, if it is someone who is not close, that is probably what it is."

Aoi let out a little puff of breath, which showed white in the cold of the room.

"Then it is quite reasonable to think that someone could have had a note from the empress that had been received during an illness and then saved."

Naka no Ben, always quick to see advantage for the empress, was looking at Aoi with concentration. "But it could have been anyone," she said.

"An empress' cold does not become widespread news. I think we must look for a palace connection. I have sent O-hana to find out if any of the Second Empress' women has recently been sick. You must tell me about the women here."

"I don't think any of them would wish to do such harm."

"This is either a crime or a tragic accident. If the person who sent them knew that they were poisonous, then the harm was deliberate. If not, then help was intended."

Naka no Ben was counting on her fingers as she passed over in her mind all the ladies-in-waiting who served with her.

"The governor's daughter who was sent away, she had a spell of fever in the early fall. She is the only one."

"Ah, I was thinking of her. She may have wanted revenge for her dismissal. If there is another possibility among the women of the Second Empress, we will have to make a test."

When O-hana returned, she said that none of the women there had been sick but that one of them had been away for a while in the late summer because her father had died.

"Who was her father?"

"The scholar, Sukemasa."

Naka no Ben nodded. "I remember the name. He was a friend of the empress' father."

"So she might have sent him a gift," said Aoi. "Well, here is what we must do." She looked around at the growing light. "And we must not delay."

Four guards were sent for and given instructions. Then Naka no Ben left to return to the empress, and Aoi sent O-hana for the morning meal. She was not really warm until she had half finished her soup.

Within an hour the men returned, reporting that they had been successful in determining who had sent the Taoist fruits. Aoi then wrote to the emperor, asking him to see her in the company of certain others.

When the time came to go to the audience hall, Aoi was attended by O-hana and two of the guards she had sent out in the morning. One of them carried a small heavy box, the other a brocade-wrapped scroll. O-hana held the long wooden box containing now only one of the fruit medicines. It was lightly wrapped in a cloth of plain blue ramie. Aoi felt that she could not dignify even in its wrappings the idea of such a medicine.

They walked in procession to the center of the palace enclosure. The wind was still and the sun shone in a blue sky, warming them. They went up the broad steps and entered by a side door.

Seated with the emperor were the prime minister, looking gray and numbed, and the two physicians who had tried to save his

daughter. Aoi was received and took her place beside the younger of the two doctors, O-hana and the two guards behind her. The prime minister frowned, seeming to imply that protection was not necessary in the emperor's hall and that it had been improper for Aoi to bring guards with her. He himself was accompanied by a secretary. After formal greetings, Aoi was asked why she had come.

"At such a time of sadness, I would not intrude except for urgent reasons," she said. "But there is a matter concerning the empress, a serious misunderstanding, and I thought you would want to hear the explanation I have discovered." She spoke as modestly as she could, wanting above all to avoid any resistance to herself and what she had to say.

Motioning to O-hana, Aoi took from her the long box and set it before her on the floor, still covered.

"This was taken from the bedside of the lady of the north corner." Aoi barely paused before selecting this way of referring to the Second Empress. She felt that she could not mention her directly so soon after her death. The prime minister looked at her with concentrated ill will, and Aoi wondered if she would be allowed to go on.

"Her lady-in-waiting had one to test it and, when there was no bad effect, gave one to her mistress, who shortly became more ill, with new symptoms."

She passed the box to the emperor, who unwrapped it and took out the square white box from inside. As Aoi continued speaking, he made his way slowly through the inner wrappings and uncovered the fruit, which she knew to be beguiling and beautiful in the strong light.

"Even though the lady-in-waiting had not been harmed by this medicine, the assumption was made that it was the cause of her mistress' increased distress and of her death."

Aoi turned to the doctors. "I do not like to give an opinion. What do you think?"

"The symptoms were strange," the senior one replied. "She had terrible abdominal pain, then the tremor began, which made her more and more alarmed and afraid, so they say."

"This is an illness we do not often see," said the other, "but we agree that it is like mercury poisoning. The symptoms all indicate that diagnosis."

"And that," said the elder, "is a dangerous thing you hold, Your Majesty. I advise you not to touch it."

Aoi relaxed. Her own case was being argued for her by the physicians. She would not even need to read to them from the scroll of the rebellious Hsien, who had, a century ago, denounced the Taoists and their secret formulas. She turned to them again. "If I may, I can demonstrate."

The fruit was passed back to her as the guard put the heavy box before Aoi. Unpacking it, he set up first a plank of wood, then a round iron pot on legs, in which were chunks of hot charcoal. On top of this he fitted a crucible. Aoi tipped the red and gold fruit from its box and it fell with a light tinkle into the crucible. Closing this open melting chamber, she set on it a domed lid that ended in a down-turned spout, a slender tube that hung over a round black pottery bowl.

The doctors nodded approvingly at these preparations, commenting quietly to each other. The emperor and the prime minister leaned forward to watch. Within minutes, tiny drops began to fall from the spout and a small, tightly rounded globe of liquid silver grew in the black bowl.

"It is as we thought, the fruit was made of cinnabar and gold. Cinnabar, my lord," the senior physician explained, "is the raw ore for mercury."

The dome was removed from the crucible and inverted on the plank. Liquid gold made a smear in the bottom, mixed with red powder and sugar, which was charring and smoking. The black bowl with its sprightly drop was passed cautiously to the emperor.

Aoi turned again to the physicians. "I imagine it was because of her throat infection that she absorbed it so quickly?"

They nodded and addressed the emperor and the prime minister. "Her throat was white with—forgive me, we need not go into detail. But the poison entered quickly through this weakened spot and had a drastic effect."

"The question then," said Aoi, "is who sent this deadly gift." She did not look at the prime minister. "It came, my lord, with a note from the First Empress, but I think that it was only the note that was hers, the fruits had another source."

Aoi explained that, since she had been sure it was not reasonable to suspect the empress, she had at once tried to imagine how the fruits and the note could have come together.

"A note from an empress, my lord, is not an everyday thing, and those who receive such notes are likely to save them, especially if they are not in a position to receive them often."

She put forth her theory that the sender might possibly have believed in the power of the magic fruits and so have intended no harm.

"These men, Your Majesty, called early today at two houses in the city. One was the house of the governor of Shinano, whose daughter was dismissed from the First Empress' service. The other was the house of the scholar Sukemasa, who died at the end of the summer. His daughter is among the ladies in the north corner. At both places the men said the same thing, that the gift of wonderful fruits had been received and had had a remarkable effect." She turned and nodded to the guards. They bowed and moved to face the emperor.

"My lord, at the governor's mansion they had no knowledge of a gift of fruit and said that they wished they could take credit for such a thing." The speaker paused and looked at his companion. The room was quiet, voices from nearby paths could be heard and the sound of wheels and street-cries from outside the walls.

The second guard continued the story. "But at the scholar's house, the widow wept and said that she had always had faith in that medicine, even though her husband had refused to take it. We asked her why she had attached to it a note from the empress. She said that a gift from a teacher's widow would not have received any attention and she thought it should go to the Second Empress at once. She asked if it had been wrong to do that. She said she would have told them afterwards that they came from her daughter, to gain favor for her."

Aoi looked now at the prime minister. She could see in his face the fear of loss of power and the struggle to determine how best to behave in this situation. She watched his strained expression clear.

"There was never any thought, my lord," he said, "that the empress was at all responsible for what has happened." He turned to the guards with a violent movement. "You must arrest that woman! Whether she had good intentions or not, she has caused this terrible thing."

The guards bowed. "With respect, sir, we left men to guard the house."

After leaving the emperor's presence, Aoi and the physicians lingered in the anteroom.

"I fear there will be more deaths," said the younger one. "We have found out who took the missing fruits, tempted by their prom-

ise, and we are treating them along with the lady who tested the medicine. But it may be too late to help them."

Aoi was silent, thinking of the greed of youth. Those fruits had been more than physical objects of exquisite beauty. They had radiated with a seductive idea which the young women could not even understand. Eternal life to them was life as it was at that moment, when they were favored by every circumstance of position, health, good looks, and personal comfort. To want what those fruits had offered was a failure of mind and of spirit, belief in the magic no worse than desire to hold forever, that which is sweet only because it is caught in its passing. Aoi looked out at the bright day and felt somber.

She stayed on for a while to keep the empress company and to make sure that she never knew the cause of those few tense hours on the morning of the Second Empress' death. Fog hid the sun and the trying days of winter resumed. The emperor stayed in his part of the palace, making himself busy with ceremonies and court affairs. The women fretted and muttered against him. The empress waited.

*A little boat hangs
Empty as a shell, fog wraps
Its bow and wavesounds
Echo in the stillness. Sky
And water, one color, blend.*

She spoke this poem and Aoi answered.

*The little boat lies
Drifting, still tied though slackly
Held. Far off the wind
Begins to stir, drawn by still
Places. Ripples show its path.*

The empress looked at Aoi and then was thoughtful. Motioning for one of her women, she asked for her writing box, chose a square of lavender paper, dripped water, ground ink, and wrote. A woman was sent into the garden and returned with long blades of withered grass, which were wrapped around the folded note. Naka no Ben found a page and sent him to take it to the emperor.

They waited for two more days. Then, "He is coming," the women said.

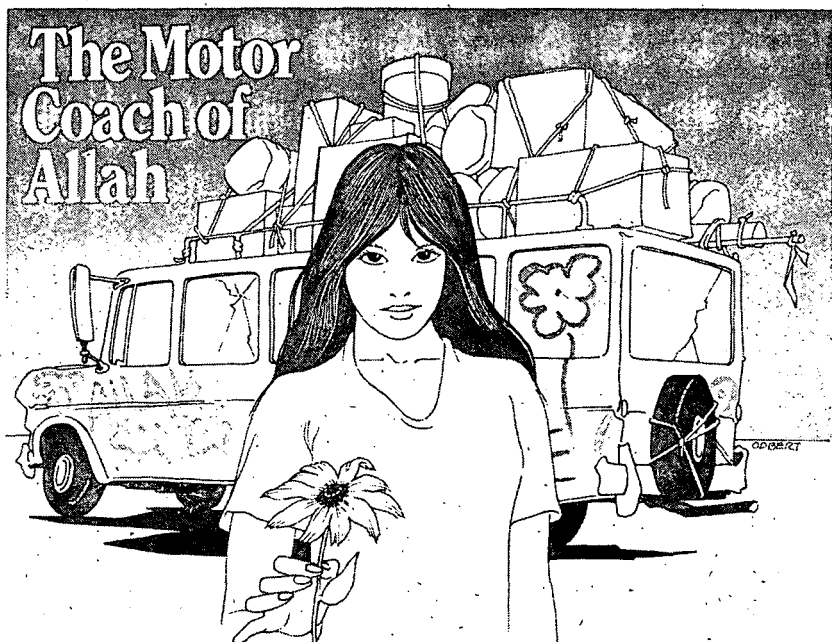
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Ships pass in the night. In the daytime, you never can tell. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the July Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.



by Walter Satterthwait

The famous motor coach arrived in the Township at middle dawn, just as the lights of the streetlamps were beginning to wash out and color was seeping back into the world. The African sky and the Indian Ocean, their horizon still a blur beyond the dark unlit shops across the square, beyond the black silhouettes of palm trees and casurina pines, were both brightening now, sliding from a pale grey to a pale opalescent blue.

Illustration by Jim Odbert

Sergeant Andrew Mbutu was sipping cardomon-spiced coffee with Constable Kobari on the patio of Abdullah Bey's cafe. The night had been a long one; both of them were exhausted. When the motor coach pulled into the square, its ancient engine wheezing and coughing, Andrew barely noticed. Kobari glanced bleakly up and muttered into his coffee cup, "Hip-pies."

Andrew turned, saw the coach, and recognized it im-

mediately: he had seen its picture in the newspaper delivered weekly from Nairobi. He was nonetheless surprised; from the picture, he had assumed the vehicle would never actually arrive, not here in the Township nor anywhere else.

He said in Swahili, "No. They're Moslems, from Europe."

Kobari frowned. "European Moslems?"

Andrew shrugged. "The Children of Allah, they call themselves. A kind of cult, apparently. Originally from England. They're traveling around the world to bring the message of Allah to the rest of us."

Smiling, Kobari said, "You'd think that Allah would give them better transport, eh, sergeant?"

It was not, in fact, a robust looking vehicle. Perhaps thirty years old, it sagged to one side as though limping. Many of its windows were cracked and starred; two were covered with pasteboard. A battered luggage rack on its roof held possibly three or four tons of parcels and bundles, everything bound down with several kilometers of rope. It had been painted all over, with gallons of mismatched paint and more enthusiasm than skill: during the day, and rinsed clean, that confusion of color

might have been attractive, festive even. But in the grey of morning, coated with road grime, it was dismal and drab and somehow pathetically desperate, like the fading makeup of a faded whore.

Its engine backfiring once, and then again, the bus lumbered to a stop across the square, directly opposite Andrew and Kobari. Only a few people were about this early in the day—two laborers, a single Somali fisherman, some servants. But all of them stopped, simultaneously, as though choreographed, to observe this marvel materialized in the center of the Township.

As they, and Andrew and Kobari, watched, the door of the motor coach swung open and the European Moslems emerged.

From the newspaper article, Andrew had expected youth, but he was startled at how young they actually were. Children indeed, he thought. None of them over twenty, most nowhere near it. Criminal to take children like that, on a bus like that, across the breadth of Africa.

The children themselves seemed hardly to mind. With an exuberance perhaps inappropriate to the occasion, and certainly to the hour, they came grinning and laughing across the square, waving at the be-

mused townspeople, circling round the stone and mortar pillar of Vasco da Gama. The boys wearing shirts and blue denim jeans, boots or sandals; the girls in loose ankle-length dresses, some white, some multicolored.

"I told you," said Kobari. "Hippies, sergeant. They have no veils, the women. They have no *bui-buis*." The black flowing robes worn by Moslem women of the East African coast.

Andrew smiled. "Perhaps packed away in their baggage."

Kobari grunted, clearly dubious.

They swept around the patio, around Andrew and Kobari, all of them, it seemed, smiling and nodding. One girl, thin and very pale, stopped, smiled sweetly at them, and said, "Hello." Large brown eyes, innocent and unafraid; a flower tucked above her ear, bright yellow against the long black hair. English, perhaps seventeen years old.

Andrew nodded, smiled. "*Jambo*. Hello."

Constable Kobari, as though to prove that he could not, would not, be duped by smiles from counterfeit Moslems, grunted again, and looked away.

Her smile undiminished, she reached up, removed the flower from her hair, and held it out to Kobari. Her skin was trans-

lucent, a tracery of blue veins visible at the narrow wrists.

Kobari scowled, quite ferocious; but his eyelids fluttered briefly, and Andrew saw that he was blushing. "Take it," he said in English. "No one will report the bribe."

Frowning, sullen, glance lowered to the table, Kobari accepted the flower. Not looking up, he said, "*Ahsante*." Thank you.

"Your English," Andrew said in Swahili, "is better than that."

"*Thank you*," growled Kobari, at Andrew.

The girl smiled again, said, "You're welcome," then turned and rejoined the stream flowing into the coffee shop.

Andrew looked back across the square and saw two more people step from the motor coach. One was tall and slender, wearing a blue denim work shirt and a black vest above his jeans. Slightly older than the others, in his early twenties, he walked loosely, easily, square shoulders back, hips slung forward. An American, doubtless; only Americans moved like that, something they learned from Clint Eastwood films.

He held his head cocked to one side as he walked, listening to the other man, who was obviously the Mullah, the leader. Short, slightly overweight, robed in a sparkling white jellabah,

he was speaking rapidly, face screwed up with excitement, small dark hands darting in circles before him.

This, then, thought Andrew, is the man responsible.

The Mullah must have sensed the scrutiny, and possibly the disapproval, for as he came to the patio, he looked directly over at Andrew. Surprisingly, his face brightened, white teeth agleam in the broad smile, and he scurried over to Andrew's table, hand outstretched. "Hello, hello," he cried. Round cheeks, a thin mustache so carefully defined it might have been drawn with a pencil, thin dark hair combed from left to right over a dark, bald scalp. "I am Ali Mustapha, oh no, please, stay seated. A very fine morning, is it not?" Beaming as he pumped Andrew's hand. His English was lilting, reminding Andrew of the singsong of the local Asians.

"Very fine," Andrew agreed reluctantly. Disliking the man and disliking his effusiveness. "I am Sergeant Mbutu. This is Constable Kobari."

The Mullah released Andrew's hand and took Kobari's. "Delighted, most absolutely." He indicated Clint Eastwood, who stood off to the side unsmiling, thumbs hooked over his belt buckle, eyeing Andrew and Kobari as though he ex-

pected them, at any moment, to brandish derringers. "This is my very good friend and the driver of our vehicle, Luke Brady."

Face expressionless, offering no hand, Luke Brady nodded once. The real Clint could have done it no better.

The Mullah said, "We will be staying in your most excellent town for several days while Luke performs repairs on the vehicle. Some strategic mechanisms have become unwell, it seems. Do you think it will be necessary for us to report our arrival to the authorities?"

Andrew shook his head. "Not necessary, no." Gossip being what it was in the Township. "But perhaps advisable. Some of the children with you seem quite young. Their papers are all in order?"

"Oh yes," beamed the Mullah, "absolutely. We have passports for them all, and permission documents from their various parents, as well as a group visa issued by your most progressive government." He leaned slightly forward, eyebrows raised, as though about to impart a wonderful secret. "We're off to India, you see."

Andrew nodded. "Yes, so I read in the newspaper." Amazing that anyone would be willing to follow this simpleton

across a street, let alone a continent.

"Ah," beamed the Mullah, "*press coverage!* How absolutely top drawer!" He rubbed his hands together, delighted.

"Yes," said Andrew. Amazing. "But even so, it might be wise for you to report to the police station. It is located three blocks down this way, on the corner of Harambee Street."

"Absolutely," beamed the Mullah, "our absolute pleasure. And I am most totally gratified for the excellent directions. Would you care to join us for a cup of coffee and perhaps a small tasty snack?"

"Thank you," said Andrew, "but no. We must be going." He pushed himself up out of his chair. Beside him, Kobari stood.

"Ah well," beamed the Mullah. "Some other time, perhaps. I seriously hope we see you again soon." He held out his hand, shook Andrew's, shook Kobari's.

Luke Brady nodded, his face still empty. Surly lout.

Still beaming, the Mullah nodded, and then he and Luke Brady turned and walked across the patio into the crowded coffee shop.

Kobari said, in Swahili, "Perhaps we should stay for a while, sergeant. In case there's trouble."

"What trouble could there

be?" He saw that Kobari was still holding the flower given him by the young English girl. He smiled. "Or is it that you'd like to see your flower child again?"

"Bah," said Kobari, and made a flipping gesture with the flower. But he was blushing once more.

"Come along," Andrew said. "We'll call in a report about them. Sergeant Oto is on duty by now; he can play nursemaid if it becomes necessary."

Kobari tucked the yellow flower into his shirt pocket.

Smiling, Andrew said, "They'll be all right. They've come this far, I doubt that anything will happen to them here."

He was, as it turned out, mistaken.

“No wounds, no contusions, nothing,” said chubby Dr. Murmaje, crouching in the sand.

"What of these, here on the arms?" asked Andrew, crouched beside him. "Could they be injection marks of some kind?"

"Oh my no," said Murmaje. "No, no, merely the bites of sand fleas. Nasty creatures, but not at all lethal, unfortunately. No, no. I'm afraid we really must have an autopsy in this instance if we wish to learn anything significant." Shaking

his head with a regret that poorly concealed his eagerness; autopsies were the only opportunity given him to investigate the inner works of Europeans.

"The C.I.D. will decide whether an autopsy is necessary."

"Oh yes," said Murmaje, "yes, of course, sergeant."

"And since he was a British national, the proper forms must be signed by the Honorary Consul."

"Oh yes." Nodding. "The good Mrs. Winfield. An estimable woman, sergeant."

"What of the time of death?"

"Oh my. Some few hours ago, I should say. Perhaps nine, perhaps as many as twelve. Rigor has advanced very nicely, you see." With stubby fingers he prodded the inert arm. "But of course an examination of stomach contents could tell us so much more. . . ."

"Yes," said Andrew, and stood. Looked at his watch. Six forty-five now; sometime, then, between six and nine last night. He looked at Murmaje. "Thank you, doctor. No doubt the C.I.D. will contact you."

Dr. Murmaje rose, a sigh escaping from between his lips like slow air from a punctured tire, and brushed sand from his drooping black coat, from the drooping knees of his black trousers. "It is always a pleas-

ure," he smiled happily, "to work with you on these affairs."

Andrew nodded, and Murmaje waddled off across the beach. Humming to himself, no doubt, at the prospect of scalpel and saw.

One day, nearly to the hour, had passed since the motor coach had arrived in the Township. Now, its colors growing garish as light returned to the sky, it was parked in the sand perhaps thirty meters from Andrew. Around the bus, in small, silent, huddled clusters, stood most of the European Moslems. Constable Kobari, notebook in hand as he took down initial statements, was moving slowly among them.

Andrew looked down at the body, which lay half-exposed in its worn sleeping bag, bare unfeeling shoulders against the cold sand, face sunken in that curious and unmistakable final slackness. He had traveled a long way, this one, only to die on an empty beach, in a strange land. Died in his sleep, it seemed: had he been dreaming of home?

No part of Andrew's job, such speculations. To work, then. He turned and walked down to the water's edge, the sand shifting beneath his feet, creeping over the tops of his police brogues. "Excuse me," he said.

The Mullah sat crosslegged

facing the sea, where now the sun had risen, a fat yellow ball shivering above the horizon. His back was straight, his hands folded one atop the other on his jellabah. He looked up, and Andrew was startled to see that he was beaming once more.

"Ah," said the Mullah. "And how are you this lovely morning, my friend?"

Off balance, Andrew automatically replied, "Very well." Then frowned. Lovely morning? Was the man demented?

"I am afraid," he said, "that there are some questions I must ask."

"Yes, yes, of course," the Mullah smiled. He patted the sand beside him. "Please join me. I am most seriously delighted to see you again."

For a moment it occurred to Andrew that the man didn't know, somehow didn't understand, that the boy was dead. He glanced back at the form lying on the sand. No: impossible. What, then, was he playing at?

Taking his notebook from his shirt pocket, he squatted down beside the Mullah. He said, "Could you tell me, please, when the body was found, and by whom?"

"Yes yes," said the Mullah, still beaming that idiot grin. "Young Belinda found him, oh, possibly an hour ago. She was

quite upset about it, of course, and so came to tell me."

"Who reported the death to the police?"

"I sent young Alex down the beach to that large attractive house on the point. I had spoken yesterday with the people who own it, a most entertaining exchange indeed, and I knew they spoke English. A very delightful couple, sergeant, the Crenchaws—do you happen to know them?"

"Not personally, no." Andrew was being slowly overtaken by a feeling of unreality: he and the Mullah, prosaically chatting away on the beach, had somehow slipped out of sync with the rest of the world. "I must say," he said, "that you seem to be bearing up to this loss rather well."

The Mullah beamed. "Oh thank you so much, sergeant." He leaned toward Andrew, lowered his voice. "But in all frankness, you know, for a moment or two I slipped into selfishness and absolutely forgot."

"Forgot," Andrew said. "Forgot what?"

"Forgot that this world, and everything in it, is the mirror of Allah." He beamed again. "I was most absolutely fond of him, you see," nodding in the direction of the body, "and I permitted my silly selfishness to lead me astray for a while. But

at last Allah, in his mercy, intervened."

"I see." Allah, yes, or brain damage. "According to his passport, his name was Robert Laird. For how long had he been with your group?"

"Oh, for quite a long time. Four years. He was one of the first, you see."

"But he was only eighteen. He had been with you since he was fourteen?"

"Youth is absolutely relative, sergeant. He was a runaway, and already he had seen things that most adults, if they are fortunate, never see. He had been involved with alcohol and drugs, and with worse."

"Was he still so involved?"

"Oh no. He was a very good boy, very kind, very serious, always offering to help."

Andrew nodded; he took "good" boys with a grain of salt. "How was his health?"

"Most excellent. He had become very good with the movements."

"The movements?"

"Twice a day we have movement classes, exercises designed to harmonize mind and body. Absolutely great fun."

"Calisthenics."

"No, no. Movements."

"Ah. Yes. And so he had no history, to your knowledge, of heart trouble? Or of any other ailment?"

The Mullah shook his head. "All of them underwent a most serious physical examination before we left London. I insisted, of course. Those who proved to be unfit remained behind."

"Had he any enemies among the others?"

For the first time, the Mullah frowned. "Enemies, sergeant? We are all united in caring and concern, and in a common quest. There are no enemies among us."

"No," said Andrew, "certainly not. But could it not be that one or another of them cared perhaps slightly less, was perhaps slightly less concerned?"

The Mullah looked at Andrew for a moment. Overhead, high up, a solitary seagull shrieked. At last the man smiled sadly. "Yours is a burdensome profession, sergeant. By its very nature you seek out, rather than avoid, discord." The smile broadened. "But I must tell you, in all frankness, that I am very seriously gratified by your attempt to humor me." Beaming again; infuriating. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid I must disappoint you with my answer. Which is, quite simply, no."

"So no diseases, no enemies. And yet the boy is dead."

The Mullah's eyebrows raised. "You suspect, I see, foul play of

some sort. What is the very colorful English word? Yes—skulduggery.”

“I can suspect nothing until I learn more. You do understand that in a case like this, an autopsy is very nearly inevitable?”

The Mullah shrugged easily. “It is only flesh now.”

Andrew frowned. A very cavalier remark, for a Moslem.

The Mullah noticed, smiled at him. “He is still with us, sergeant. The patterns may change, but they remain the same.”

“Yes.” Patterns now. “You will also be contacted by Mrs. Winfield, the Honorary Consul. There are certain documents with which you must deal, I am afraid.”

“Yes yes,” said the Mullah, beaming again. “Nothing escapes the embrace of documents, eh, sergeant? Not even death.”

Suddenly, from behind, a familiar voice called, “*Sergeant Mbutu!*” Andrew turned and saw, striding toward him across the sand, garbed in a superbly tailored safari suit (whose color, after a moment’s thought, Andrew identified as mauve), Cadet Inspector Moi. Behind him trailed Hasdrubal Inye, his sergeant. The Criminal Investigations Directorate had at last arrived on the scene.

Andrew stood, nodded to the

Mullah, said, “We shall perhaps speak again.”

The Mullah beamed. “Oh, very good. I look forward to it; sergeant, absolutely.”

Andrew moved off to meet Inspector Moi, who now, passing by the body, glanced briefly at it and muttered something to Inye. Inye stopped and squatted down beside it while Moi continued on.

“Right, then,” said Moi, meeting Andrew. “Suppose you put me in the picture.” After only a single exchange year at Scotland Yard, Moi could deliver such a phrase as though he had been born speaking it.

Andrew related the little he had learned.

Inspector Moi yawned elaborately. “Not much to do with us, by the sound of it. Heart attack, probably. Or drugs.”

Andrew said, “I should not think drugs. They cannot have been carrying them on the motor-coach—looking like that, it was very likely stopped and inspected by every policeman between here and the border. And they arrived only yesterday. They have hardly had time enough to locate a supply.”

Moi sniffed. “So heart attack, then. Just as I said. Happens often enough, lot of these *Wazunga*”—Europeans—“can’t take the heat.”

“He was in good health.”

"Not all *that* good, obviously. Ha ha." He looked over at the body, stroked his stylish goatee. "Still, I suppose we'll have to have an autopsy. Bloody waste of time, but there it is." He turned toward the Mullah, who still sat facing the horizon. "That the high muckamuck?"

Andrew nodded. "The leader, yes."

"Communing with Allah, is he? Or just waiting for a train? Ha ha." When Andrew failed to respond, he frowned, stroked his goatee again, and said, "Right, then. We'll take over from here. Have your man give what he's got to Inye, and then the two of you can trot along."

Few women could, with accuracy, be described as barrelchested; Mrs. Winfield, the British Honorary Consul, was one of these few. Short, stocky, hipless, with a stomach that jutted, like a construction foreman's, over the belt of her inevitable bluejeans, she never used cosmetics and she wore her stiff grey hair like a man's, short and parted on the left. She seemed, however, despite all of this, not so much masculine as utterly and unalterably neuter, as though the concept of gender were one she refused to accept, one that had nothing whatsoever to do with herself. (There had been a Mr.

Winfield, but he had died some twenty years ago. For precisely this reason, said Township wags.)

She was sitting bent over her desk, her square back, shirted in plaid flannel, facing Andrew as the young Somali house servant led him into the book-lined study and announced, in flawless British English, "Sergeant Mbutu, madam."

"Half a minute, sergeant," she said over her shoulder. "Thank you, Dullah." She was grappling with something inside a shoebox that lay amid the books and papers cluttering her desktop. A new pair of sensible walking shoes?

After a nod to Andrew, the servant turned and padded soundlessly from the room.

"Hah!" said Mrs. Winfield suddenly. "Got you!" She swiveled round to Andrew, grinning and holding triumphantly aloft, her fingers wrapped around its black carapace, an insect the size of a soupbowl. And the thing was *alive*: its black chitinous legs whirled frantically. Andrew could hear them clicking from across the room; his stomach dipped.

"A beauty, isn't he?" she said proudly. "Rhinoceros beetle. Just arrived. You never see them this big hereabouts. Cousin of Ali's found it upcountry. Look at those *horns*."

Mrs. Winfield had something of a reputation as an amateur entomologist. Andrew, who felt rather faint, realized that this was something that he ought, perhaps, to have borne in mind before coming.

"Yes, my sweet," she said to the beast, holding it up towards her face. Its long legs clawed the air between them as though it very much wanted to flay the skin from her face. "Hush now. Back to your box. We'll see you in a little. There you are. Ah." She fitted the cover onto the box and turned again to Andrew.

"Sorry, sergeant. Self-indulgent, but I had to take a peek at the chap. Here, please, sit down." She indicated the chair beside the desk.

Warily, Andrew eyed the shoebox.

"Oh no," she said, and smiled. "He's quite safe in there. And I assure you, he's a good deal more alarmed by you than you are by him."

That, Andrew thought, was most unlikely. But, with another uncertain glance at the box, he crossed the room and sat down. From within the box came a dry scuttling sound.

"Now," she said. "How can I help you? In mufti today, I see: Traveling incognito?"

"I am here unofficially."

"Yes? Personal matter? Visa?"

Andrew shook his head. "It

has to do with the young English boy who died two days ago."

Mrs. Winfield frowned. Her face, coarse-featured and round, was one of those saved from ugliness by a quick mobility of expression. "But unofficially, you said."

"Yes. You are familiar with Dr. Murmajee?"

"Of course, yes. I signed the forms for him, permitting the autopsy."

"Yes. He is disturbed, you see, about this boy's death." So disturbed, as it happened, that he had come to Andrew's house this morning and forced Mary to wake him up. "He was unable to determine any cause for it."

"Cardiac arrest, I thought. I have the report here somewhere." She waved a vague hand toward the desktop. "Got it from the C.I.D. chap who dresses like a Nairobi ponce."

"But cardiac arrest merely means that the heart has stopped, without in any way explaining why. Because he could find no actual cause, Dr. Murmajee was to some extent, ah, pressured into signing to it."

"Pressured by whom?"

"Certain of the authorities."

She smiled. "Discretion called for, is it?"

Andrew nodded. "As I say, there was nothing to indicate

what had caused the death. Nothing external, no foreign substances in the body. All his organs were perfectly healthy."

"But the boy is, after all, dead."

"Exactly, yes."

"And Dr. Murmajeel feels . . . what, precisely?"

"He feels, without being able to substantiate it, that the boy may have died of asphyxia."

"Asphyxia? Strangulation? But surely that would leave some indications?"

"Strangulation would, yes. There is a small bone above the larynx, the hyoid, that in such cases is often broken. Damage to the larynx itself is frequently found. There are other signs. Something called petechiae, tiny ruptured capillaries in the eyes that are visible under close examination." Most of this Andrew had been told earlier today, by Murmajeel.

"But none of these was present," she said.

"No. But they are, as I said, the result of strangulation, of force applied directly to the throat area. As Dr. Murmajeel points out, it is possible to effect asphyxia without such force."

"Is it really?" said Mrs. Winfield, eyebrows raised in interest. "How, exactly?" As though she herself were planning to give it a go.

"Simple suffocation. An ob-

ject—a pillow, for example—is placed over the face, obstructing nose and mouth. With such a death, the only physical symptoms would be edema, fluid, in the lungs. And this occurs with a death of nearly any sort."

"But the person being suffocated—he'd struggle, I should think. And rather desperately, at that. And wouldn't that leave marks of some kind? Bruises?"

"Normally, yes. But the boy was lying in a sleeping bag, and possibly asleep. His arms were at his sides. Dr. Murmajeel feels that if someone had straddled him, with his knees on either side of the torso, and then used a pillow, there would have been no such marks. The sleeping bag would have rendered the boy immobile."

She winced. "How awful. And I take it that you agree with Murmajeel?"

"I agree that it is possible; yes."

"But who would do such a thing?"

"As yet I have no idea. But clearly the probability is that it was another member of the boy's group. They had been in the Township for only one day. It is unlikely that in that time the boy made any enemies outside his immediate circle."

"But why would one of the others kill him?"

"Again, I have no idea."

She sat back. "Well. What is it, exactly, that you'd like me to do?"

"From what I understand, the group plans to drive to Mombasa sometime tomorrow, to catch the ferry boat that goes to India." Today was Wednesday. "They are traveling here on a group visa. In order for them to leave the country, they must obtain a copy of the release you will be signing for the boy's body, to have it shipped back to England."

Mrs. Winfield nodded. "And you'd rather I didn't sign it."

Andrew nodded. "Yes. If that were possible."

She frowned. "The C.I.D. is satisfied, I gather, with this determination of cardiac arrest."

"Yes."

"They plan to conduct no investigation."

"No."

"But you do."

"Yes."

"Unofficially."

Andrew shrugged. "I am off duty for two days, and am permitted to spend my time as I like."

She nodded. Looking off, she scratched her short-cropped hair. She looked back at Andrew. "They're British nationals, you know, most of them. My responsibility is to them. It's not as though you've any proof,

you see. They have a right to leave when they wish."

Andrew nodded.

"On the other hand, if you're right, one of them is a murderer." She frowned. "All right," she said. "Let's do this. I'll hold off on the release for a bit. Say three days. That'll give you until Saturday, at any rate. And there'll be no other ferry until a week from Friday, so perhaps they'll stay about the Township until midweek next. But I can't guarantee that, of course. Three days is the most I can give you. And strictly speaking, I shouldn't be giving you that."

"I understand," Andrew said. "And I am grateful."

She smiled. "You bloody well should be. And keep me informed, mind. If you learn anything, let me know."

Andrew parked his moped by the side of the beach road and walked across the bright white sand. A breeze, sharp with the smell of salt, was blowing steadily in off the ocean.

Some of the children, perhaps half the group, most of them in bathing costumes, were scattered round the beach, sitting alone or in small clusters. The motor coach still stood where it had two mornings before. Since then, however, it had been washed and polished; in the

brilliant noonday sun its painted sides bustled with swirls and whorls of color.

From under the front end of the vehicle, beneath the hood, two pairs of legs were jutting out along the sand. One, in bluejeans, feet shod in pointed-toed cowboy boots, presumably belonged to Clint Eastwood. The other, draped in the folds of a white robe, might have been the Mullah's. If the Mullah wore red ankle-high basketball shoes.

As Andrew approached, he heard an American voice say from beneath the engine, "Wrench."

Beside the robed legs lay a stained tarpaulin, atop which was spread a variety of tools. From underneath the bus a small brown hand emerged and slapped at the canvas, slapped again, searching. The chrome-plated spanner it sought was perhaps six inches beyond its reach. Andrew stepped forward to help.

In the days and weeks that followed, he was never certain that he actually saw what he thought he did. He had, after all, managed only three hours of sleep before Murmajee came pounding at his door. The air today, despite the breeze, was oppressively hot. His eyes hurt and a dull headache was beginning to blossom, like an evil

flower, behind his forehead.

But what he thought he saw, as he bent forward to reach for the spanner, was the spanner jump, as though to a magnet, across the six inches of tarpaulin and into the open awaiting brown hand. *Smack.*

Andrew blinked and stood up straight. No.

He looked quickly all around. The sun still hung, fierce and hot, in the glare of blue sky; the green waves still curled and slapped and foamed against the slick wet sand. Off to his right he could see the towers and minarets, the warehouses, shops, and homes of the Township. His moped still crouched by the side of the road, looking frail and fragile and yet, for precisely this reason, somehow infinitely reassuring.

Nothing had changed; and nothing, therefore, had happened.

Tired, too much sun; seeing things. The man reached for it, snatched it up. Need to get some rest; and soon. Get this over with, then to bed.

He cleared his throat. "Excuse me."

The red basketball shoes jerked suddenly skyward and a muffled thump came from beneath the vehicle. A brief pause, then the heels of the shoes dug into the sand, the robed legs began to shimmy awkwardly

out. The Mullah appeared, round face beaming up at Andrew.

"Ah, my good friend," said the man, and scurried to his feet. He clapped sand from his hands, then offered the right one to Andrew. With his left, he reached up and rubbed at his forehead. Bumped himself down there, no doubt.

"I am sorry," Andrew said, "to have startled you."

"No no no," said the Mullah. "Not at all, it is a most absolute pleasure to be seeing you again." He nodded to Clint Eastwood, who had also emerged from beneath the motor coach and who stood beside him, scratching his arm idly and watching Andrew with a blank face. "Luke and I were finishing the necessary maintenance on our conveyance. Most of the major work has been accomplished, and we will be able to depart on the morrow. Allah willing."

"So I had heard," said Andrew. The round shiny face, the thin pretentious mustache, the gleaming bald head that vanity had tried to conceal beneath those pathetic strands of pomaded hair: the man was so patently trivial and inconsequential, so commonplace, that Andrew (after the curious optical illusion of the spanner) felt almost grateful to him for it.

"And how," said the Mullah, "may we be lending you our assistance?"

"I wished to speak with some of your, ah, followers. About the death of the young boy."

"Oh no," said the Mullah. "Not followers of *mine*. We are all followers, together, yes? Of Allah, of the Way."

"Yes, surely," said Andrew. "But nevertheless, if you have no objections, I should like to speak with them."

"But of course!" said the man. "We are all, most certainly, at your absolute disposal." He frowned as though puzzled. "But it was my understanding, from what the other police person said, that any bewilderments concerning this have been most thoroughly dissolved."

"Yes, of course. I intend merely a kind of summation. To tie up, as they say, the loose ends."

The Mullah beamed. "The loose ends! Yes! Absolutely! Tie them up, bind them, by all means. We'll have none of *those* lying about, eh, Luke?"

Silly man. "Was there, among the other members of the group, one in particular in whom the boy might have confided?"

The Mullah frowned thoughtfully. "Hmm. Confided. We are all of us, of course, confidantes each of the others. But I apprehend your meaning, yes."

He nodded. "Young Sharon, I should say. Yes. It was my perception that young Bob was somewhat rather smitten with young Sharon. Wouldn't you say so, Luke?"

Luke gave a bland cowboy shrug. "They hung out together. So did Bobby and Peter." If he were required to, evidently, he could actually talk.

"And are they nearby?"

"Peter is in town," said the Mullah. "But Sharon is over there, reclining in the fabulous sunshine."

"Then excuse me. I will perhaps speak with you again."

"Oh yes. I look forward to it totally."

Andrew nodded; the Mullah nodded, beaming; Luke Brady merely inclined his head fractionally. Exhausted, no doubt, by his torrent of speech,

Walking toward the girl, Andrew wished that Kobari had been available this morning. Kobari had talked to some of the children during the preliminary interviews; might have noticed something, suspected something. But Kobari, also off duty for two days, had apparently vanished. Gone from his rooming house; disappeared.

The girl lay on a fading, olive-drab military blanket, her right arm bent over and covering her eyes. No Moslem woman of the Township would

dare be seen in public (nor most likely even in private) wearing that bathing costume. Technically modest, a one-piece suit of the sort favored by Olympic swimmers, it was flesh-colored, clung like a second skin, and revealed everything it pretended to conceal.

"Excuse me," he said.

The girl lifted her arm from her face and, using it to shade her eyes, looked up at him. "Yeah?" Australian? Cockney?

Andrew introduced himself. "I wonder if I might speak with you. It concerns the death of the boy, Robert Laird."

"Thought that was all settled. His ticker, they said."

Clearly the girl had managed to transcend her grief. Perhaps Allah, as in the case of the Mullah, had intervened. "Yes, of course. Only a few final questions."

She took a deep breath; her bathing costume tautened impressively; she sighed. "Right," she said, and sat up, crossing her legs beneath her. She nodded to the unoccupied area of blanket. "Grab a pew."

Andrew preferred to squat down where he was.

"Right," she said again. "Fire away." Eighteen or nineteen years old, not fat by any means but still with something of childhood's plumpness. Shoulder-length brown hair, clear

spotless skin (quite a lot of it). Large round brown eyes; a small nose; full and slightly swollen, sullen-looking lips. A face at once vacant and sensual.

"I believe," Andrew said, "that you and the boy were friends."

She shrugged lightly. "We're all friends here."

"I understood that you two had perhaps a special friendship."

She frowned. "How d'you mean?"

"Only that he had a special fondness for you."

Relaxing, she shrugged again. "That was *his* lookout, wasn't it." Perhaps she heard the callousness, for she added, "I mean, look, he was a nice kid, and maybe he fancied me. But all we were was friends, really."

"You two were often together?"

"I dunno as you'd say often. He used to hang about and help me, like."

"With what?"

"Different things. You know. Pack up my bag, my sleeping bag, so it was all right and proper."

"Did he ever confide in you?"

"Confide what?"

Good Lord; like pulling teeth. "Anything."

"Not so's you'd notice. I mean, we've all been together on the bus, haven't we. Been to the same places, seen the same

things. Not much to confide about, is there."

Another tack. Chat her up, gain her confidence. "Have you been a member of the group for long?"

"Me? Not long. Bit over a year."

"You joined in London?"

"Yeah, right." Looking off, bored. This approach was working splendidly.

"What were you doing then? Before you joined?"

"Bit of this, bit of that." She frowned. "I thought you wanted to talk about Bobby?"

"Yes, but to understand Bobby, I must, I believe, understand something of your group."

"Well, what I did before, that's *my* business, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course." Prickly. Try again, something neutral. "Tell me about this journey."

"What about it?"

Andrew sighed. "You have enjoyed it? Europe? Africa?"

She shrugged. "It's been all right. Europe was nice. France, Germany. Didn't much fancy Switzerland. We were stuck for two weeks in Zurich. Diabolical."

"Why stuck there?"

"Bloody Swiss bas—some Swiss rat fiddled with the engine. Vandalized it. Took Ali and Luke that long to find parts."

"You call him Ali?" asked

Andrew, somewhat surprised.

"It's his *name*, isn't it." For the first time, she smiled: derisively. "What you think we call him? *Swami*? We're not bloody yogis, you know. We're Moslems. Allah is our only God. A man is only a man. Even a holy man like Ali."

"You believe he is holy?"

"Would I be putting up with the bloody heat and the dust if I didn't? All this traveling?"

Andrew nodded with a look that he hoped resembled sympathy. "A journey like this, it must be rather expensive. Food for all of you, incidentals, petrol. From where does the money come?"

"Donations."

"From whom?"

"People. People we meet in the streets. And Ali knows people. Sheikhs and all. They give sometimes. Anonymous. We got a big donation about six months before we left. Couldn't have done the trip without it."

"For how long has the trip been planned?"

She shrugged. "I dunno. Ask Ali. They were planning it when I joined."

"Tell me about your arrival in the Township."

"What about it?"

Andrew took a deep breath. This was, it appeared, going to take a while.

Slowly, piece by piece, he got

it out of her. After leaving the square that morning, where Andrew and Kobari had first seen them, they had driven here to the beach. Luke Brady had found accommodations in a nearby *pension* for those who wanted it. No one, she said, was required to sleep on the beach, although most preferred to do so.

The morning was spent in sightseeing. In the afternoon, the group split into three parts: one passed through the Township, distributing pamphlets that described the trip and requested donations; one obtained supplies, cleaned the motor coach, and prepared the campsite; the third was free to rest or wander about. (Standard procedure, she said; on any given day, roughly a third of the group was free to do as it liked. "There is no life," the Mullah liked to say, "without fun.") Bobby had been on the cleaning detail; it was he who swept out the motor coach.

The group rejoined at four thirty for movement exercises, followed at five o'clock by dinner.

"Did Bobby," Andrew asked, "act any differently that day?"

She shrugged. "He seemed a bit moody. At dinner. But sometimes he got that way."

"You spoke with him?"

"No."

"Did anyone?"

"Peter, I think. They were mates."

"What happened after dinner?"

After dinner, they had all retired for the evening. (This they invariably did at sunset, at which point the fun presumably ended.) Luke Brady had gone off with the *pension* contingent; the rest had gotten into their sleeping bags.

"Did you see or hear anything during the night?"

"No. I was sleeping, wasn't I?"

"All night?"

"Yeah."

"You slept near Bobby?"

"No. He liked to sleep off by himself. So do I."

"Who slept nearest him?"

"Vickie. The American. That's her, over there." She nodded toward a slender blonde girl lying on another blanket, perhaps twenty meters away.

Vickie was perhaps the same age as Sharon, and wore an identical and identically distracting bathing costume. (Was this a religious group, Andrew wondered, or a bloody swim team?) Raised in California, she had, she said, joined the group two years ago in London, where her father was Someone in the embassy. With an enthusiasm that Andrew attributed

to her Los Angeles upbringing, she told him that she thought Africa was super. She thought Allah was super, as well, and Ali also. She did, however, have some reservations about Sharon.

"I mean I don't want to bad-mouth anybody," she said. "But really, she treated poor Bobby like dirt. You could tell he was crazy about her, okay? Like you could see it. I mean he used to follow her around like a little puppy dog or something, you know? Pathetic. And Sharon never gave him the time of day."

"Did Sharon have some other interest? Some other friend?"

The girl had an even-featured American face, bright and animated and unreflective. Her blue-eyed glance flicked now toward the motor coach. "I think she had a thing for Mr. Cool. The Desperado."

"Luke Brady? The driver? Did he feel the same way about her?"

"Him? No way. Luke doesn't lower himself, you know?" A trace of rancor? Rejection?

Andrew summarized: "So Sharon was fond of Luke, who did not respond, and Bobby was fond of Sharon, who did not respond."

She nodded. "And Belinda was fond of Bobby, who didn't respond."

"Who is Belinda?" Another

one. Like secondary school, these intrigues and attachments. And then he realized, with a start, that secondary school was, of course, precisely where all these people should be.

"She's not here now. She's in town. She's *wonderful*. You'll love her. Everybody does." She sniffed. "Even Luke."

"And Belinda, she perhaps resented Sharon?"

"Uh-uh. No way. Like Belinda doesn't resent *anybody*, okay? I mean she's a sweetheart, like a hundred percent."

"Tell me something," Andrew said. "Are, ah, relations permitted between members of the group?"

She grinned. "You mean like sex? No, of course not. We're all dedicated to Allah. Sex is only for marriage, you know? And if people want to get married, they've got to live away from the rest. They still *belong*, but it's like, you know, not the same."

"What would happen if someone did have relations?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's never happened. Ali would talk to them, I guess."

Andrew nodded. "Tell me, if you would, about your arrival in the Township."

Vickie's account, while considerably more elaborate than Sharon's, generally conformed to it. At dinnertime, Bobby had

seemed withdrawn, "Like he was thinking, you know?" No, she didn't know why; but maybe Peter did, the two of them had talked.

Andrew said, "You were, I believe, the one sleeping nearest to Bobby. Did you see or hear anything during the night?"

"I saw Luke."

Andrew raised his eyebrows. The driver, according to Sharon, had spent the night at the *pension*. "When?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I don't wear a watch, I keep time with my body rhythms. But I woke up and looked over and saw Luke walking back toward the road."

"You are certain it was he?"

"Yeah, for sure. I could see him when he got to the road. The streetlights, you know?"

"Did you see anyone else up and about?"

"Uh-uh. I couldn't get back to sleep, so I just sat up for a while watching the stars. They're really beautiful here. But finally I had to get back into the bag—the bugs were killing me. Look." She showed him her arms, both lightly spotted with pink. "It's creepy, you know?"

"What is?"

"I mean like I was sitting there and Bobby was maybe, you know, like maybe his heart attack had already happened."

As Andrew walked back to the motor coach, he saw a young boy coming from it, toward him. Fair hair, a pale blue shirt, khaki trousers, sandals.

"Hi," the boy said, and smiled. "I'm Peter. Ali said you wanted to talk to me." English accent; probably the same age as the other two.

No one lay under the motor coach. Andrew said, "The Mullah has left?"

"He's gone into town with Luke."

"Come, then. Let us go where it is cooler."

The two of them walked to the coach and Andrew, tired of squatting (alongside all that exposed young flesh) sat on the shaded sand. The boy sat down facing him, and scratched at his ankle.

"The sand fleas have attacked you as well?" Andrew said.

The boy grinned. "They're savages, aren't they?"

The entire group had been ravaged by the beasts. Why on earth hadn't they slept somewhere else? In another Township, for example. In another country.

"Ali really likes you, you know," the boy said.

"Pardon?"

"Ali. He really likes you. He said that the two of you are in the same business."

"Oh? How so?"

"Solving mysteries, he said."

Andrew grunted. Perhaps the Mullah would like to solve this one.

Peter had, he said, been with the group for about a year, having joined it shortly after leaving school. His account of that first day in the Township matched Vickie's and Sharon's.

"I have heard," Andrew said, "that Bobby seemed perhaps distressed that evening, at dinnertime, and that you spoke with him."

"Well," said the boy, "yes, I did." A certain reluctance.

"Could you tell me what you spoke about?"

"Bobby was unhappy."

"About what?"

"Well, he was very fond, you see, of one of the girls here."

Andrew nodded. "Sharon, yes."

The boy grinned, grateful, and evidently relieved that he wouldn't have to name her. "Yeah. He liked her a lot."

"Yes?"

"And, well, she wasn't as fond of him, you see. Not in the same way."

"Yes. And?"

The boy sighed. "He told me he was going to ask her to marry him."

"Ah."

"I told him, naturally, that I didn't think she'd accept. And

that even if she did, he wouldn't be able to stay with the rest of us any more. That's one of the rules. He said that he didn't care, and that if she didn't, he was going to leave the group anyway."

"Yes?"

"Well, that really would've been awful. It would've been a hassle for us, of course, because we're on a group visa and it would've meant a ton of paperwork. Ali wouldn't've been pleased. But it would've been really terrible for Bobby. He loved the group. So I told him to think about it some more, and talk about it with Belinda."

"Belinda." Again.

"One of the girls. I knew she was fond of Bobby, and I thought maybe she could talk him out of it."

"Did he speak with her?"

He shrugged. "I don't think he had the time. We went to bed right after supper."

Andrew nodded. "From where you slept, could you see Bobby?"

"Not really. He was about sixty, seventy feet away."

"So you saw nothing that night?"

"No. I was fagged out. I slept through to morning."

"And Belinda? Where was she sleeping?"

"Over there, I think." He pointed to an area relatively near to where the boy had lain.

"Is Belinda still in the Township?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her since yesterday."

"Yesterday? She did not sleep here last night?"

"Oh, I'm sure she did. But I didn't. Luke asked me to stay in the *pension* last night."

"Why?"

"He had things to do, he said, and he wanted me to keep an eye on the rest of the kids."

"Did you tell him, at any time, of your conversation with Bobby?"

"No. Bobby asked me not to."

Andrew nodded. "I should like to meet this Belinda."

"But you already have."

"Excuse me?"

"The day we got here. I saw you talking with her outside the coffee shop. You and the other policeman."

Andrew remembered. The long black hair, the translucent skin. The bright yellow flower: a gift.

To Constable Kobari.

Kobari, when Andrew returned to the Township, had not come back to his boarding house; no one had seen him all day. Andrew left a note asking the constable to come to his home as soon as possible. Kobari never came.

Early the next day, Thursday, Andrew drove the moped

to the boarding house. Kobari had still not come back. When he drove out to the campsite, the Mullah told him, smiling placidly, that Belinda hadn't come back either. Luke had gone into town to look for her.

Wonderful, Andrew thought. Luke and Kobari, a duel in the dust. High noon on Main Street.

"She will return," the Mullah assured him.

"You seem unworried."

"Oh yes, of course. Allah will protect her."

Idiot.

"Consider," said the Mullah. "If we were to leave today, as we had most certainly planned, we would have had to await her. But Mrs. Winfield, the totally remarkable Honorary Consul, has informed me that she cannot provide certain necessary documents until Saturday. You see? Events unfold themselves in perfection."

Andrew nodded. "When is it, then, that you intend to leave?"

"Oh I think on Saturday, yes, after we obtain the documents. A pleasant drive down to Mombasa, and then perhaps a few days in the villages south of there. They are most colorful, I have been told."

So. Two days left. "May I speak with a few more of the children?"

"But absolutely, my good friend."

Andrew spoke to a few more of the children, and from them learned nothing new. The same story from all. Bobby had cleaned the bus, Bobby had been somewhat withdrawn at dinnertime, Bobby had died without anyone seeing anything. Yes, Bobby was fond of Sharon. Yes, Belinda was fond of Bobby.

Where was Belinda?

Where was Kobari?

That night, Andrew was reading *Babar* to his son when someone knocked at the front door. Andrew got up from the armchair, crossed the sitting room, and opened it.

Kobari.

His clothes, brown slacks and a yellow sport shirt, looked rumpled, slept-in; his face was sheepish.

"Where've you been?" Andrew exploded. He glanced quickly back into the house, stepped out, pulled the door shut behind him.

"Tsavo," Kobari said.

"Tsavo?" A game park, a hundred kilometers away.

"Yes. The English girl—you remember her? The one at the coffee—"

"You were with her at Tsavo? For two bloody days?"

"I borrowed my cousin's car. It broke down in one of the gulies, and the rangers didn't find

us until this afternoon. I knew I had to stay by the car." There were lions in Tsavo; last year one of them had eaten a Japanese tourist, camera and all. "And then getting the car repaired—"

"Why take her to bloody Tsavo?"

"She was upset, sergeant. The boy who died, she was his friend. I met her at Abdullah Bey's and we talked. I thought she'd feel better if she saw the animals."

"For two bloody days?"

"Why so angry at me, sergeant? What have I done? It's not my fault that my cousin is a pig who doesn't know how to treat an automobile."

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry. You brought the girl back to the beach?"

Kobari's glance shifted. "Well, no, not yet, sergeant. I was hoping, you see, that you'd come with us and help explain. The rest of them may think that something happened that actually—"

"Where is she?"

Kobari nodded to the road. "In the car."

Friday night, eight thirty. Andrew sat beneath a small thorn tree on a sand dune overlooking the campsite, perhaps a hundred meters away. In the clear starlight he could just make out,

against the grey beach, the darker form of the motor coach.

He had been sitting here for an hour waiting for some brainstorm to overtake him, and of course, none had.

He had believed for a moment, speaking with the girl, that he might learn something. She had been unable to sleep that night, she said. She had seen Bobby thrashing about, also sleepless, seen him sit up and stare out at the ocean. She had meant to speak with him, had even put on her bathing costume, the only clothes close to hand, and gotten out of her sleeping bag to go to him. Had changed her mind. Let him come to her for a change; always, it was she who went to him. But to show him she was available, if he wished to speak, she had walked down to the water, entered it, and begun to swim.

When she looked back, she saw that he was lying down. Annoyed, she swam farther out. She lay in the bay for a time, floating on the lukewarm water; for perhaps twenty minutes, she said. (Andrew, never a nighttime swimmer, had a vision of sleek grey sharks circling beneath her, each as big as the motor coach.) When she returned, he seemed to be asleep. She had lain on her bag, drying off, until the sand fleas had

driven her inside it.

Had she seen Luke Brady? No.

What time had she begun this swim? Not late. Eight, perhaps nine.

So the boy was still alive at eight; Dr. Murmaje, from his analysis of stomach contents, had thought as much.

Suppose, Andrew thought, she *had* spoken with the boy. He reveals that he intends to ask Sharon to marry him. Enraged, she pretends concern, sisterly affection. Tucks him in. Trots off, grabs a pillow, comes back, jumps on top, and suffocates him.

Possible. Physically, at any rate. According to Murmaje, neither strength nor weight would be required. The boy himself was slight and, trapped within the bag, helpless.

But even if it were true, how could Andrew prove it?

And what of the driver, Luke Brady? Answering in cowboy monosyllables, he had admitted leaving the *pension* that night to come to the beach. He wanted to make sure that everyone was settled in. And were they? Yep. Did he see anything? Nope. What time had this been? Don't know. Ten, maybe.

Why had he not slept in the *pension* the following night? Needed parts for the bus. What parts? Spares. Fan belt, plugs.

Could he not get them during the day? Didn't have time. Was he fond of Belinda? Yep, real nice girl.

Belinda, heartbroken at Bobby's revelation, *does* see Brady, and tells him. Brady obligingly smothers Bobby for her.

Nonsense.

But someone did smother the boy. Why?

What had Bobby done that day that marked him for murder? Nothing. Cleaned the motor coach. And there was nothing untoward about the motor coach: Andrew had looked. Two rows of simple bench seats, the last seat on the right removed to make room for a grey metal box bolted to the floor. Inside it, nothing but emergency equipment. Fire extinguisher, first-aid kit, bottled water, tinned food, some cannisters of paint.

Contraband concealed aboard somewhere? No room for weapons or gold or drugs. Diamonds? But diamonds would have been found by border guards looking for drugs: on two separate occasions, the motor coach had been completely stripped, upholstery ripped away, all the baggage opened.

Hopeless. And tomorrow they would be gone, all of them. Including, possibly, a murderer.

Something bit Andrew on the calf. A sand flea. Idly, he slapped

at it. Abruptly, he sat up. Looked at his watch. Then jumped to his feet and ran down the dune to his moped.

“It is of course,” the Mullah beamed; “a most absolute pleasure to be seeing you for the second time today. But perhaps you could explain to us why you wanted us to gather here together.”

He sat, white-robed and plump, on the sand in the shade of the motor coach. The others sat around him: Luke on one side, Peter on the other, Sharon and Vickie and Belinda behind. Andrew and Kobari, both in uniform, stood.

“I have brought,” Andrew said, “as I told you this morning I would, the documents from Mrs. Winfield. But I am afraid you will be unable to use them.”

“Indeed?” said the Mullah, with a smile. “And why is this?”

“They will need to be revised once again because I must arrest one of you for the murder of the boy, Robert Laird.”

“Ah,” said the Mullah. “And who might that be?”

“This one,” Andrew said, pointing. “Peter.”

Peter jerked back his head. “What?”

“The other day,” Andrew said; “when I spoke with you, you were scratching at the bites of

sand fleas on your ankle. It occurred to me, afterward, that the only people who were bitten by the fleas were those who spent time outside their sleeping bags that night. Vickie and Belinda both admitted to being outside their bags, and both were bitten. Belinda told me she saw Bobby sitting up, out of his bag, and indeed, he was bitten as well. Even Luke Brady, who was here at the beach for only a short time, walking about, he was bitten—I asked him this morning. But Sharon, on the other hand, had not been outside her bag, and consequently was not.” He nodded to Sharon, whose skin was as spotless now as it had been three days before.

He turned to Peter. “And yet you claimed that you had gone to sleep immediately after dinner, and slept until morning. You could not have been bitten the following night, because you spent it at the *pension*. I have inquired, and none of the others who slept there was bitten by any insects at all.”

Peter laughed, lightly, easily. “Sand fleas, for God’s sake. I don’t know when the bloody things bit me. *Before* I went to sleep, probably.”

“No,” said Andrew. “No, I spoke with Mrs. Winfield last night about these creatures. She is an entomologist, you see.

She told me that they emerge from the sand only some two hours after sunset, and return to it some two hours before sunrise. The sun sets at six thirty. Two hours after that, at eight thirty, if you were telling the truth, you were safely inside your sleeping bag. You should not have been bitten, particularly not on the ankles. But you had been. And so, you must have been lying. You left your bag that night, and you did so to murder Bobby Laird."

"Come off it," Peter said. "This is bloody ridiculous. Why would I kill Bobby?"

"Why," Andrew nodded. "Yes. It puzzled me. Why would anyone kill Bobby? But Bobby, as everyone stated, was withdrawn at dinnertime, disturbed about something. It was only on your word that this was due to his infatuation with Sharon. Once again you were lying. He was disturbed because, in cleaning out the motor coach that afternoon, he noticed something that he should not have."

Andrew turned to the Mullah, who sat watching him with a small smile. "Last night I was considering what sort of contraband might be smuggled using the motor coach. Gold was one of the possibilities. In some parts of India, gold fetches three times what it does in Europe.

I dismissed the idea, however, because gold is bulky, is difficult to conceal. I was thinking of ingots, you see.

"But gold is a metal. It can be melted and molded into whatever shape one wishes."

He looked back to Peter. "On Monday, when Bobby was cleaning the coach, I believe he noticed that the paint had chipped off the metal box in the back of the bus. He saw what lay underneath. I examined it myself this morning. The box is solid gold, and no doubt weighs well over five hundred pounds. No one could know this, however, for the thing is bolted to the floor and cannot be lifted."

"Hold on," said Luke Brady. Andrew turned to him. "I put that box in there myself. Bolted it in. It's steel, and it doesn't weigh any five hundred pounds."

"You put in the original box. In Zurich, which is, of course, one of the largest gold markets in the world, the other box was substituted. First, however, Peter sabotaged the engine of the motor coach, so that he might have time to effect the transfer."

Andrew turned to Peter. "Bobby found the gold, realized what it was, and did not know what to do. Was the Mullah, a man he respected, involved in smuggling? He then made a

dreadful mistake. He spoke about his dilemma with the one person, of all the group, who would kill him because of what he had learned. You."

"You're wrong," Peter said, shaking his head. "You're wrong."

"You knew you had to dispose of him, but could not do so immediately. You told him not to discuss this with anyone. Perhaps you told him that the two of you would confront the Mullah in the morning. That night, awaiting your opportunity, you saw Belinda go swimming. You were afraid that when she returned Bobby might reveal to her his secret. So, while she was out in the bay, you killed him. The next day, you painted over the chipped surface. The paint canister is still inside the box."

"This is *insane*," Peter said. "Where on earth would I get five hundred pounds of gold?"

"Oh, I have no doubt that you were merely a hireling. Your employers, whoever they are, told you to join the group a year ago. Told you to sabotage the engine, assist in switching boxes, and then to guard the gold until it reached India. I suspect that they were the source of the anonymous donation that made this journey possible. What, after all, is a few thousand pounds sterling when the profit to be realized

will likely exceed a million?"

"This is bloody bloody crazy," Peter cried, "and you've no proof for any of it."

Andrew nodded. "Perhaps not. But you will stand trial. And the gold will be confiscated. Even if you escape legal justice, I expect that your employers will exact a justice of their own. You have, of course, lost them everything."

The boy moved too quickly for Andrew, or for anyone, to stop him. The knife was out of his pocket, the blade flashing open, his arm snaking round the Mullah's throat, all within an instant. He jerked the man to his feet and held the knife point against his robe, beneath his chest. As Luke Brady prepared to spring for him, he jumped quickly back, tugging the Mullah with him.

"No one move!" he snapped.

"This is foolish," Andrew told him. "You have no way—"

"*Shut up!*" He looked quickly around him. "Belinda! Get in the bus. You're going to drive us out of here."

Constable Kobari took a step forward; Andrew put a hand on his shoulder.

Belinda stood up, her face anxious and uncertain.

"You hear me?" Peter said, and jabbed the tip of the knife into the Mullah. A bright red stain appeared on the man's

robe, began to spread. The Mullah's face, however, was expressionless. Peter snarled, "Get on the bus, you bloody stupid cow!"

Just then, suddenly, the Mullah's hands flew up towards the knife. It looked to Andrew, impossibly, almost as though he were pulling it toward himself. But perhaps Peter, startled, merely reacted instinctively: the blade plunged into the white robe, and the Mullah's body trembled, slumped.

Peter's mouth was open, and then Luke Brady was on him, his fist smashing into the astonished face.

A week had passed. Andrew sat, once again, under the thorn tree on the dune overlooking the campsite. The area was deserted. Before they left for Nairobi, to catch their flight to London (the journey having been, by unanimous vote, canceled), the children had swept it clean. Now, in the glare of sunlight, it was merely a bright white empty strip of sandy beach. One might think that nothing whatever had happened here.

The gold had been confiscated. Peter (not, it transpired, his real name) was in prison,

waiting to face one smuggling and two homicide charges. Kobar was still sulking; even the girl's promise to return next year had not cheered him.

Why had the man done it? To protect the girl?

For even if he had not himself plunged in the knife, simply by moving like that, so suddenly, he had in effect committed suicide.

Could a truly holy person commit suicide, even to save another?

If he *had* been a holy man, how had he not sensed the evil in Peter? Could not even holiness, then, penetrate to the interior of the human heart?

The body was returning to London on the flight with the children. They had requested it; Mrs. Winfield had helped arrange it. In a sense, at any rate, he still traveled with them. What was it he had said? The patterns may change—

"But yet they remain the same," said the clear singsong voice behind him.

The back of his neck suddenly cold and taut, Andrew whirled about in the sand.

Nothing. No one. Only a seagull, far off, wheeling and disappearing against the dazzle of sun.

UNSOLVED

by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban")

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the Mid-December issue.

I regret to report that five schoolgirls, who recently competed for a scholarship, decided that it would be "rather amusing" to send home mendacious—or partly mendacious—reports of the result.

Gay wrote: "I took second place. Joan was a little in front of Edwina." Edwina: "Gay was last. Mollie was well ahead of Pat." Joan: "I only took fourth place. Mollie came in second." Pat: "Joan was third. Edwina did better than Mollie." And Mollie: "Edwina took third place. Pat (to our surprise) won the scholarship."

No two candidates tied for a place. Each girl made one true statement and one false one.

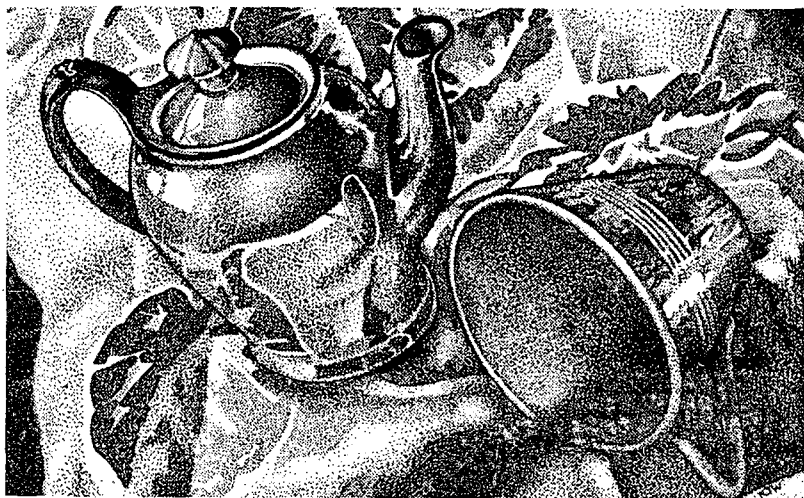
In what order were the five candidates placed?

See page 149 for the solution to the November puzzle.

"Scholarship," taken from My Best Puzzles in Logic & Reasoning by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban"). Copyright © 1961 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

The Last Rose

by L. A. Taylor



“Admit it,” Lieutenant Fowler demanded. He leaned his hairy knuckles on his desk and raised his tall, bulky body until he loomed over the frightened-looking elderly woman opposite. “Fifteen thousand dollars is a big temptation for a woman in your position.” He ticked the dreary details of her position off on his fingers. “Too old to get a job, minimum Social Security, no assets, stuck taking care of a spiteful old harridan—”

Alma swallowed and jerked her head in a small nod. “But I didn’t kill her, sir,” she interrupted, pleading. “I was her companion for twelve years, happy years, why would I kill her now? I didn’t know about the money she left me.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

Again, the jerky little nod.

“When you wrote out all her correspondence for her?”

“It was only because she couldn’t write for herself, since that last stroke,” Alma explained. Her voice was thin and high. “She could

read just fine, and there was nothing wrong with her mind. I guess one of the times Mr. Mooney visited, she had him make out a new will."

"Six months ago."

"Is that when it was?" Alma blinked her reddened eyes several times. "Then why would I wait this long? The money was there, everything else was just as you say, and she wasn't getting any easier to deal with. Please, you've got to believe me."

"I do? Why?" asked the lieutenant, his eyebrows lifted. "I don't see one single reason. In fact, I'm going to arrest you and charge you with the murder of Rose Rianne, right now." He pulled a dog-eared card from his wallet and began to read while Alma half listened, something about her rights. She fastened on the one sentence he had said slowly and clearly enough for her to understand.

"I want to call Mr. Mooney," she said.

Lieutenant Fowler's eyebrows shot up. "You think he'll help you?"

"Of course he will," Alma said. "And besides, he's the only lawyer I know."

She was sitting on the edge of the narrow bunk in her cell, clasping her wrinkled hands under her armpits to warm her cold fingers, when the plump female guard came and told her Mr. Mooney had come to see her. Alma rose and brushed the seat of her skirt tidily, then followed the guard down the short, echoing corridor to the locked door to the jail. The key clicked in the lock and the door swung wide. Alma took a deep breath.

In this jailhouse, a part of the police station, visitors faced the inmate they had come to see across a wide, plain table with a wire grating down the middle of it. Mr. Mooney was waiting on the other side of this fence, looking so distinguished, with his neat silver hair and blue-grey suit and the nice, subtly striped tie. Alma smiled at him, a small smile under the circumstances, and sat down on the edge of the grim chair provided.

"Now, Alma, what's all this?" the lawyer asked, with the tone one might use for a favorite child in some unexpected and surely undeserved kind of trouble. He listened while she tried out a few bewildered-sounding sentences and fell silent, realizing that she wasn't explaining a thing. He began to ask more questions then, gentle questions Alma answered as best she could, about the night before and this terrible, frightening morning. When he'd run out of questions, he sat with his right index finger extended along his

cheek and his middle finger curled under his elegant mouth for quite some time, gazing into the distance while Alma knotted her fingers together and looked at them as if they belonged to someone else.

"I think I see," he said slowly, startling her. "Don't you worry, Alma. I'm going to talk to Fowler and see if he'll agree to a little investigation I have in mind. You just sit tight." He grinned, showing a gold rim around one of his front teeth, and picked up the long yellow pad he'd written her answers to his questions on. The plump wardress came and took Alma back to her cell, where she sat on the edge of the bunk again and surveyed her surroundings with distaste. But surely Mr. Mooney would get her out, soon! She was counting on him.

Two endless hours passed before the guard returned, jangling her keys. "You'll want this," she said, lifting her arm, over which she carried Alma's own worn green tweed winter coat. Alma's heart leapt. She'd *known* Mr. Mooney could do it! And faster than she'd dreamed . . . but when she had her coat on and was allowed out of the cell, that beastly lieutenant had her handcuffed to one of his men, and she had to match steps carefully going down the steep granite steps outside the station, or risk having her wrist pulled painfully, perhaps even stumbling and falling. Here, outside, Alma's faded blue eyes had taken on a vague expression; she blinked often and cleared her throat from time to time, like so many other old ladies.

At the bottom of the steps a police car was waiting, and they all—herself, the policeman to whom she was attached, Mr. Mooney, and Lieutenant Fowler—got in. A few minutes later they pulled to the curb in a familiar spot. "Are you taking me home?" Alma asked, sounding bewildered.

"Not for long," said Fowler. "Mr. Mooney here thinks he can straighten something out. But I'll tell you, Miss Weston, when an old lady dies of an overdose of sleeping pills, and the woman who lives with her inherits fifteen grand, I don't let go easy."

They all got out of the car, not easy for Alma, chained as she was to the policeman's wrist. Her cheeks burned as they passed the doorman in his elegant puce and tan uniform. He turned on his heel and looked away, instead of greeting her cheerily as he had always done before. *Imagine being snubbed by a doorman*, she thought, cringing. Never had she ever suspected that she would find herself in such a position! In the elevator, she prayed that no one she knew would get on as the cage slid silently upward. "I hear

Rosa Rianne was a real bitch," the lieutenant remarked.

"Lieutenant, please watch your language," Mr. Mooney said stiffly. "There's a lady present."

The lieutenant slid a sideways glance at Alma. "Okay, say she was real demanding. Kept you running day and night, never a please or thank you—"

"Oh, that's not true," Alma murmured. "Rosa was demanding, yes; she was used to a lot of attention from being an actress, but she *always* said please."

Mr. Mooney laughed. "Alma, you're too sweet!" he exclaimed.

The elevator stopped at the floor Alma had lived on for twelve years, companion and nurse to the old lady, and the four of them got off and trooped down the hall. The door of the apartment was taped shut, a police notice stapled to it, but Fowler just ripped off the tape and opened the door with Alma's own key, taken away from her hours before. "Now," he said.

Alma and the policeman sat down on the red velvet couch; Mr. Mooney and Fowler sat on the two silk-covered chairs. "Tell me again all about yesterday," Mr. Mooney said to Alma. "Start with the afternoon mail. I might stop you and ask you some questions from time to time."

"All right." Alma dragged her eyes away from the sleek Steinway baby grand, already filmed with dust in just twenty-four hours. "Well." She blinked and sucked in her lips while she got her thoughts in order. "After the mail came, I took it in to Rosa, opened it all for her, and so on—she could use her hands, but they weren't strong enough to open an envelope. A few minutes later she called me back in, very upset. One of the letters was from an attorney out in Oregon, to let her know that an old friend of hers had died. She cried about it all afternoon, poor thing, and nothing I could do would please her."

"Where is this letter now?" Fowler interrupted.

Alma blinked at him. "I don't know," she said. "Among the papers near her bed, I suppose."

Fowler checked a list in his pocket notebook. "We didn't find any such letter," he said. He leaned forward and stared at her. "So we have only your word for it."

Alma made a fluttery little gesture with her left hand. "It should be there," she protested. "I can't imagine where else it would be. I didn't move it, and Rosa can't—couldn't—get out of bed by herself."

"Just go on, Alma," Mr. Mooney said. "Don't worry about it."

"About nine o'clock she asked me to bring her a music book, and I got one out of the piano bench and took it to her. She said, 'No, not that one, the *56 Songs You Like to Sing*.' I was a little surprised because she hardly ever wants to sing anything out of that."

"Sing!" said Fowler. "I thought she was bedridden with a stroke!"

"The paralysis in her legs was from an auto accident years ago," Mr. Mooney explained. "The stroke didn't affect her speech. Just weakened her arms—the right one was almost completely paralyzed. That's why Alma wrote out all her letters for her lately. But her mind was as clear as a bell, I can assure you of that."

"Then what?" Fowler asked Alma.

"Well, I took the one book back, and brought her the other, and then I went out to the kitchen."

"You didn't stay to listen to her sing?"

Alma smiled uneasily. "I can't abide it when she sings," she confessed. "Her voice isn't at all what it was once, you know, but she *will* sing. I find the best thing to do is stay in the kitchen. It's got a silenced door, you see."

Mr. Mooney smiled with what looked like satisfaction. "What did she sing last night?"

Alma cocked her head to one side and looked at him. "Do you know, now that you mention it, I don't believe she did. I didn't hear her, at any rate, and she never lost any volume—just had to breathe in odd places, and well, you know, sounded cracked, the way we old ladies do."

Lieutenant Fowler pounced. "If she didn't sing, why did she ask for the book?"

"I don't know."

"Surely you don't expect Miss Weston to read minds!" Mr. Mooney said to the lieutenant. "Rosa never gave reasons for anything she did, although I have an idea about this one." To Alma he said, still smiling, "Tell me what happened next."

"Well, after a bit the bell rang in the kitchen, and I went back in to her. She said she wanted to go to sleep early and asked for some cocoa, so I made a pot. She always liked two cups, you know, in the little Japanese teapot that holds the heat so well. I give her the pot and a cup, and she can pour it out herself with two hands. So that's what I did last night. Then I put a Seconal where she could reach it when she wanted. I was in my own room reading, and after a while I looked in on Rosa—she was asleep—and I went to bed myself. Then—" Alma's voice broke and she bit her lips. "When I got up this morning—"

"That's all right," Mr. Mooney broke in. "You don't have to tell us that part again."

"How long had that been going on?" Fowler demanded. "You just leaving the sleeping pill?"

"Oh, for years," Alma said. "I know it's not right, I should have stood there to watch her take it, but that's the way she wanted it. And Rosa—well, she always did get her way."

Mr. Mooney was nodding: "So there you have your opportunity," he said to Fowler. "She could have saved them up."

"Did you ever see any pills hidden around her bed?" Fowler asked Alma.

She wanted to twist her hands together in her lap, but that would put the young policeman's hand in her lap, too, so she couldn't. "No, actually," she admitted.

"Could she have hidden them from you?"

Alma was silent for a long time. "I wouldn't think so," she said, in a very small voice. Fowler glanced triumphantly at Mr. Mooney.

"Let's go look at the room," Mr. Mooney sounded quite confident. "We may find something you missed before."

"There wasn't any suicide note, I can tell you that," Fowler said. "If that's what you're thinking."

"Of course not," Mr. Mooney said. "She couldn't write, and it's not the sort of thing she'd be likely to get Alma to do, now, is it?"

They all went into the bedroom. Alma heard a small gasp from the policeman beside her. Well, Rosa's room *was* somewhat overpowering—pictures of her in all her roles in filigreed gold frames hanging on the walls, ruffled silk curtains and draperies on the bed, thick soft carpet, and even now a sort of fug of perfumes and powders, although Rosa was gone. Four comfortable chairs upholstered in brocade that matched the walls stood about, waiting for guests for her to play to, to entertain, and on each side of the bed stood white-gilt tables, each with a shallow drawer, for the accumulation of her things each day. Yes, a little overpowering; Alma squeezed her eyes shut.

"Let's see," the lawyer said. "It all looks much as usual. Did you ordinarily clear her bedside tables, Alma?"

"No, sir," she said. "We had a woman come in to do that." Mr. Mooney stalked across the room and pulled out the drawer of the table to the left of the bed.

"Aspirin," he reported. "Glasses case, one of the snap-lid kind for her rimless glasses, bobby pins, a lipstick, mirror, tissues—"

"We know all that," Fowler said impatiently.

The lawyer reached into the drawer and took out the glasses case. "What's in here, if her glasses are out on the table?" He snapped the lid open and looked inside: Without a word, he held the case out first to Alma and then to Fowler. A capsule was jammed down into the narrow space where the bottoms of the glasses should fit.

"One of the Seconal capsules," Fowler exclaimed. "Wait until I get my hands on whoever missed that!"

"There's where she kept them," Mr. Mooney said. "But I know Rosa. She couldn't write, but she'd leave a message somehow. And since she wasn't singing—" He reached for the music book beside the bed. "Ah, what's this?" He flipped the book open and a letter fell out.

"Why, that's the letter she got yesterday!" Alma exclaimed. "But why would she put it there?"

"A placemark," Mr. Mooney said. "At the last verse of 'The Last Rose of Summer.' Shall I read it?" Without waiting for a reply, he read,

"So soon may I follow
When friendships decay,
And from love's shining circle
The gems drop away.
When true hearts lie withered,
And fond ones are flown,
Oh! who would inhabit
This bleak world alone?"

"There's your suicide note, lieutenant," he said. "Very clever, and just like Rosa."

"A suicide note in a book of music?" Fowler asked incredulously. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Think about it, lieutenant," Mr. Mooney said, smoothly, persuasively. "The woman has outlived most of her contemporaries. She's almost helpless. For months, she's been squirrelling away those capsules, while Alma thought she was taking them to help her sleep, just for this purpose. She gets news that an old friend, a good friend, has died—and it isn't even a personal letter, it's just a letter from an attorney! No one she knows! So she asks for the music book, not so that she can sing—why would she want to sing when she was grieving at such fresh news?—but so that she can leave the message that this is of her own doing, nothing to do with

Alma. She did trust Alma, you know," he continued, his voice taking on a regretful, respectful timbre. "There was genuine affection there."

Fowler glanced at Alma, who was wiping her eyes with her left hand, and nodded. "Sounds reasonable," he said. "You knew her and I didn't, and I don't see any reason not to believe you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little key, with which he unlocked the handcuffs. "Let's go back to the station and get you formally released," he said to Alma.

They locked and resealed the apartment door and got into the elevator. On the way down, Alma started to cry softly: it wouldn't do to look too happy now. As she wept, she congratulated herself. All those months of saving the Seconal whenever Rosa didn't take it, setting aside the one Rosa had dropped, in case someone thought of taking fingerprints from the capsule in the glasses case, putting the music book with the letter in it beside the bed (Alma, to her horror, had to stifle a giggle: Rosa had flipped the letter toward the front of the bed and said, "There's another one gone. Get rid of that, will you?"). And then, opening the capsules and stirring the powder into the cocoa, extra-sweet and chocolatey the way Rosa liked it. Getting pompous old Mooney to play her game without even knowing it. Fifteen thousand dollars!

I always was a better actress than Rosa, she thought, and froze. Oh, dear God! There *was* something she'd forgotten!

Lieutenant Fowler tracked her down in the tiny furnished room only ten days later. "Well, Miss Weston," he said. "I'm sorry to say I'll have to arrest you again, and this time I don't think you'll get off."

Alma nodded. "It was the gelatin, wasn't it?" she asked, as she settled her hat.

"That's right," Fowler acknowledged. This time he held her coat for her, and in the little mirror on the back of her door his mouth looked grim. "The gelatin that left no trace in the old lady's stomach. That left no trace in the teapot or the cup. The gelatin from the empty capsules that weren't hidden near the bed by the old woman who couldn't get up by herself. Believe me, we searched."

Alma nodded, biting her lips.

"What did you do, walk into the bathroom and flush them down the toilet?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes," Alma admitted. "Thoughtless of me, wasn't it."

Career in Crime

by Janet
O'Daniel



The first year of his retirement, Clifford Macklin spruced up his garage workshop, tended the yard, took an interest in the garden, planted bulbs and annuals in the proper seasons, told everyone he was enjoying the rest, but secretly longed to be back at work. The second year he took to crime.

He had not wanted to retire. Nor had he, at first, sensed danger when his boss, Harry Melvin, brought his son-in-law into the firm. Clifford could detect in the background the shadowy

machinations of Harry's wife and daughter. Still, there seemed to be no real threat for a time. Clifford himself was the Mel-Mar Appliance Company's star salesman, his route the choicest, his customers the cream. Also, he was concentrating on a major coup—getting back the account of the Griswold chain, once a lucrative customer but for some time lost to Mel-Mar. He had been setting it up for months by stopping in often at the flagship store where Mr. Griswold had his office, helping out here and

Illustration by Peter D. Fasolino

there with a suggestion, making himself useful in small ways.

"If you were to pyramid those hair dryers by the front door and knock down the price, bet you'd unload 'em fast—be glad to give you a hand with it—"

Mr. Griswold began to act friendlier. When Clifford finally landed the account of the eight stores, he knew it to be the capstone of his selling career. His commission would be a handsome one. It was on that very day, as he returned to the office in triumph, that Harry Melvin called him in and brought up the subject of retirement. It scarcely registered with Clifford.

"Retirement!" he exclaimed, still euphoric. "Hell of a time to ask me about that, Harry. I just landed the Griswold account."

"No!" Harry's eyes lighted up. He slapped Clifford on the back, said he'd known all along that he could pull it off, then had to hear the details.

Clifford explained it, adding, "Patience, that's what it takes. You can't let yourself give up."

It was just then that the office door was pushed open and Harry's son-in-law, Jack Ludlow, stuck his head in. A cloud seemed to gather in front of Harry's eyes.

"Oh—Jack. Come on in. We were talking about a big one Cliff landed today. The Griswold stores."

"No kidding." Jack eased himself into the room. He was a young man but already overweight, and his eyes, retreating into flesh, reminded Clifford of a pig's. Clifford ignored him coldly, turning back to Harry.

"Not a bad commission for me either, the way I figure it."

There was a thick silence in the small, cluttered office. Harry glanced awkwardly at his scarred desk with its litter of orders, invoices, penciled notations, its hopelessly twisted telephone cord. Jack, standing just inside the door with his hands in his pockets, shirt buttons strained across his stomach, said, "I thought we'd discussed that, Dad."

"Discussed what?" Clifford demanded.

"Well, you know, Cliff, Griswold was always a house account," Harry said uneasily. "Always did their ordering direct from the firm—no salesman. I mean, that's the best way with an account that large—take the orders direct—"

"You wouldn't have had an order to take without me!" Clifford exploded. "You'd never have got that account back!" He felt like adding that Jack Ludlow's ineptness had probably lost the account in the first place. No tact, no sales savvy there. He knew all about house accounts, too, a favorite dodge to get around paying salesmen's com-

missions. But Harry wouldn't do that to him. He and Harry went back a long way.

"Best thing anyway," Jack Ludlow said. "After all, if Cliff's going to be retiring—"

Harry shot his son-in-law a venomous look. "We were just talking about it, Jack. Why in hell do you have to rush things?"

"Oh—sorry," the younger man said casually. "But no use beating around the bush, is there?"

It was then that Clifford felt the cold mist around his heart. He saw a blackness in front of his eyes and something rang and whined in his ears.

Harry said, "Sit down, Cliff. You look done in." He shoved a chair behind him and Clifford sank down on it.

"You really want me to retire, Harry? Seriously?" He could feel Jack Ludlow's presence, could feel the pig eyes watching him. He refused to look in that direction.

"Well, hell, you're old enough, Cliff," Harry said frankly. "And you'll be okay. I know you've planned ahead, plus you'll have Social Security. There'll be a nice little severance bonus for you, too."

"But I'm doing better than I ever did! Why should I want to retire?"

"I know that, Cliff. You're an ace. No argument there. But that's the way the system works, doesn't it? Got to keep things

moving, got to make room for new people, keep the fresh blood coming in."

Clifford thought of his route, his customers, all built up over the years—all friends, every one of them. Not just contacts, as some salesmen called them. Friends.

"Who's going to take over my customers?" he asked, feeling the cold mist again.

"We'll divide it up among the other salesmen." But Harry's eyes had flickered toward Jack Ludlow.

Like a pie, Clifford thought. Like a goddamned pie. And no question about who'd get the biggest piece.

Clifford's wife Gladys was upset over the news. The drop in money was the prime reason, of course, but Clifford sensed that she was not looking forward to having him around the house, either. He said, "Don't worry. I'll get something else. Maybe only part time, but something. I'm not ready to pack it in yet."

"You think that's going to be easy at your age?" Gladys demanded sourly, and turned away, blaming him.

Penny Fletcher, the head bookkeeper at Mel-Mar, was more sympathetic. "I'm just so upset, Mr. Macklin, over what they've done to you," she said, shaking her head. Clifford

thought there was even a trace of tears in her eyes. She'd been with the firm almost as long as he had, and he'd always thought her a cheerful sight in the office with her sweet smile and small fluting voice.

"Oh, it's all right, Mrs. Fletcher," he said. "I guess I'm due for retirement anyway."

"Well, you certainly are not," she said in a whisper. "You're the top salesman in this company. They think anybody can do what you do. They think that route will still be profitable with somebody else on it. They'll find out."

Clifford was surprised and touched by her loyalty. "Thank you, Mrs. Fletcher," he said. "That does me a lot of good, hearing you say that." Not many people would have understood, he thought. Not many would have known what it took to build up a route.

He found to his chagrin that Gladys was right about its not being easy for a man his age to get another job. He went around town applying for one job after another and discovered very quickly that he was invisible. Men of his age were simply not seen. People looked past him, over his shoulder into the middle distance behind him, and said no, sorry, haven't a thing. In Wilmot's Men's Store he even volunteered assistance to a

woman customer who was looking over shelves of shirts and then preparing to leave unwaited-on—even as two smartly-dressed clerks across the store conversed about restaurants and ignored her. Clifford approached her and said, "Perhaps I could help?"

Her relief came out in a sigh. "Oh, thank you. I can't seem to find size fifteen thirty-two."

He found it quickly and had just pulled the stack of shirts out for her when Mr. Wilmot himself, large and florid and smelling of after-shave, loomed up and took over.

"You could certainly use some better help around here," Clifford said in a low voice. "Perhaps I could talk to you later about—"

"Get lost, Pop," Mr. Wilmot hissed at him angrily, and gave his attention to the woman.

Clifford was restless that first year, missing his route and his feeling of usefulness. Also, he was not used to being so much with his wife, who seemed constantly irritated by his presence. He could sense that he was upsetting her routine, and too, she indicated with sighs and looks that he made extra work for her around the house. He tried to compensate by doing useful jobs, being diligent about lawn mowing and weeding the

garden. She managed to indicate that the boy she had formerly hired had done it better. Of course, now that they could no longer afford the boy...

He began to notice little things about her. The way the back of her neck looked when she came home from the hairdresser—naked and clipped and somehow reminding him of a turkey's. The roll of fat around her waist. The small grunting sound she made when she bent over to put her shoes on. The way she belched after a meal. Things he had not noticed before. His workshop in the garage became a haven. He took a small portable radio out there, and a folding chair, and spent long hours, even when it was chilly, pretending to be working on something. Now and then he produced some item—a screen he had repaired, a chair he had reglued. Between that and the garden, he kept the fiction of a contented retirement going.

Sometimes he read, an occupation he had always enjoyed. Once he took from the library a copy of a play called *Death of a Salesman*. He knew it to be a famous play, and he tried to see himself in it, to identify with Willy Loman, the main character. But he himself was no failing route man, no has-been drummer. He had been booted out at the top of his form.

And attention was not likely to be paid, he reflected, re-reading one of the lines and thinking about what it meant. Often he thought about the commission money Mel-Mar had stolen from him. He always considered it in those terms—as stealing.

Toward the end of that first year, with the weather cold and snowy, Gladys slipped on a patch of ice downtown and fell—fractured her leg and had to be hospitalized. After only two days in the hospital she suffered a heart attack and died. Clifford was stunned by the suddenness of it. Cards and telephone calls came to the house, all carrying the same mournful message: Just when the two of you were starting to enjoy life together...

Their children appeared for the funeral—Fred from San Francisco with his new wife, Della or Bella; Clifford never did get her name straight. And Cindy from New Orleans with her husband Edgar, a chiropractor. Edgar spoke darkly about hospital practices and hinted at neglect, but Clifford assured him mildly that he was quite satisfied Gladys had had the best of care.

All of them told him he should sell the house and move into more efficient quarters, a small apartment somewhere, perhaps. He nodded and said he'd give it some thought. Then,

when they had left for the airport, he sat down in the living room, put his feet up, and lighted a cigar from a box some caller had left. He did not ordinarily care for smoking, but today it seemed to him quite pleasant. He turned on the television set and a football game appeared. Gladys had disliked having the games turned on; he was not even sure who the two teams were. Once he had sorted them out he began to take an interest.

One day during the second year of his retirement he went into a bank to buy a money order to send to his sister Eunice in Santa Rosa, California. It was for her birthday, and he knew twenty-five dollars would be welcome. Eunice lived alone on Social Security, but when Gladys was alive he had never dared do much to help.

"What does it cost for a twenty-five-dollar money order?"

"Fifteen cents," said the teller, looking over Clifford's right shoulder at someone behind him. The man's face lighted up. "Lola!" he said. "How are you? I'll just be a minute."

"Fifteen cents?" Clifford repeated.

"That's right," the teller said, impatience creeping in.

"I'd like one, please."

The teller did not answer, but

turned to a machine and hurriedly typed out the money order. He handed it across the counter to Clifford.

"That'll be fifteen cents," he said. Clifford handed him a dime and a nickel and left with the money order. At the door he froze. He had not been asked for the twenty-five dollars. He went on walking rapidly out of the bank.

He arrived home trembling slightly and keyed up over the incident. He was enough of a student of human nature to know that the teller had been distracted—first by a query as to the fee for the money order, then by the presence of someone he knew—a girl—in the line behind Clifford. Of course, Clifford reasoned, one could not always count on that sort of setup. But certainly there was no trick to producing a bit of distraction. Sleight-of-hand artists lived on it. He gave it a great deal of thought that night.

After a time he tried it again in another bank, making a point of inquiring at some length about the fifteen-cent charge and expressing a lively interest in the bank's computer. Again, to his astonishment, it worked. On the third try he was asked for the twenty-five dollars, which he produced at once with an agreeable smile. He began to branch out, spreading his business widely since any num-

ber of establishments sold money orders, he discovered. His diversionary conversation grew smoother, more convincing. Some of the clerks asked for the money, some did not. The amazing profitability of it staggered him. He began to explore neighboring towns, driving there for the day and spending the morning at his business, as he had come to think of it, then taking his brown-bag lunch to a local park if the day was fine and sitting there to eat it and watch the squirrels and pigeons. Sometimes he found a point of historic interest to visit in the afternoon—a museum or a notable cemetery—and felt his horizons broadened by the whole experience. He always kept the amount of the money order modest so as not to attract attention. Distraction was the key, of course, but reason told him that the basic cause was deeper. It was not, after all, the clerk's money, and money belonging to someone else was not guarded as jealously as money of one's own.

He decided to try something different.

He went to a restaurant and ordered lunch, a salad plate and coffee. When he left, he stopped at the cashier's counter near the door and unobtrusively placed a dime and two pennies on the counter. At once, when

the woman turned to him, he asked directions to the Green Valley Park and picnic area.

"Yes, of course," she said. "Straight along this street to the edge of town, then look for the signs saying Route 12 West. That'll take you right to the park entrance."

Clifford shook his head with admiration. "Some people have the most remarkable sense of direction," he marveled. "Now, I couldn't have given clear, concise directions like that to anyone if my life depended on it."

The cashier blushed and admitted that she had always had a fairly good grasp of such things, and Clifford, still marveling at it, picked up the dime and two pennies as if it were his change and left, the check for his lunch still in his pocket. The cashier told him to have a nice day.

The next day he rented a safe deposit box at his bank.

He was, now and then, bothered by conscience. He knew it was not right, what he was doing. But it was immensely stimulating, and also, he reasoned, he was not hurting the innocent, only taking a bit from large impersonal entities, corporations. At night his mind worked busily, planning new ventures. At last he felt he was ready for something not larger but involving more skill and acting ability. He presented

himself at Wilmot's Men's Wear.

He hung back, waiting until Mr. Wilmot himself was free before moving to a display of socks and selecting a pair of inexpensive white cotton ones. He took it to the counter and laid it down. Mr. Wilmot, large and sweet-smelling, eyed it critically.

"Just the one pair?"

"Yes, please. Just the one."

"That'll be one fifty," Wilmot said. He glowered and waited while Clifford fumbled in his pockets and came up with a twenty dollar bill.

"Oh dear," Clifford said. "I am sorry. I thought I had something smaller."

The store owner seized the bill impatiently, and Clifford continued to fumble apologetically in trousers pockets, shirt pocket, seeking a smaller one.

"Are you the James Wilmot who's just been elected president of the Chamber of Commerce?" he asked suddenly.

"That's right." The cash drawer opened and Mr. Wilmot placed Clifford's bill under a little wire spring.

"Thought I recognized your picture in the paper," Clifford said. "They can certainly use an independent businessman to head things up. I think they've been going downhill lately."

"Think so myself." Mr. Wilmot sounded pleasanter. He pulled out Clifford's change.

"That street festival last year, for example," Clifford said. "Fiasco, from what I heard."

"You heard right," Mr. Wilmot said, handing him the change. "They need somebody with a grasp of good old double-entry bookkeeping, that's what they need."

"Absolutely," Clifford agreed. He took the money and reached once more into his shirt pocket. "There! I knew I had it somewhere. Exactly the right amount. One-fifty. Just give me back that twenty. I've said, I don't know how many times, they could put this town on the map if they'd ever get a man of proven ability in as head of the Chamber. Well, now I guess they have."

Mr. Wilmot handed him back his twenty dollar bill and the small paper bag containing his socks.

"Too early to tell yet," he said as Clifford turned to leave. "Come back and see us again!"

Clifford lifted a hand in farewell and walked unhurriedly out the door.

The following week, on a fine bright day, he had taken his newspaper to a small park downtown, planning to sit in the sunshine and read for an hour, when he saw a familiar figure on a bench just off the path. He hurried over.

"Mrs. Fletcher!"

She looked up from her book, and at once a smile spread over her face. "Why, Mr. Macklin!"

"Say, I am glad to see you," he said, and joined her on the bench. "How come you're having a day off in the middle of the week?"

Her smile faltered for an instant, then readjusted itself.

"Well, actually, I'm not with Mel-Mar any more."

"You're not?"

"No—I was let go last month."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Well—they've brought in some new systems, some new office equipment, and of course there are younger people who've been trained to use it—" Her voice broke off and then she said, full of concern, "Mr. Macklin, I can't tell you how sorry I was to read in the paper about your wife. That must have been a very sad time for you."

"Thank you," he said, holding his breath and waiting, but she did not say, just when the two of you were starting to enjoy life together. He added, "Yes, it was a sad time." He said it because she seemed so sincere and he wanted her to think well of him.

"But you have children, don't you?" she said. "They must have been a great comfort to you."

"Oh yes, of course—"

"I thought so. I was widowed many years ago, but unfortunately we had no children."

"I never knew that, Mrs. Fletcher. Then your work must have been quite important to you—as an interest, that is."

"Oh yes, as an interest, and for the income, too." She smiled wistfully. "But I'm managing—one can always manage."

"Well, I don't think Mel-Mar is going to find your efficiency and loyalty in any machine," he said, shaking his head.

"Mr. Macklin, you are kind. But I'm afraid I can be replaced quite easily."

"Are you thinking of taking another position?"

Her face grew shadowed. "No. I did a bit of looking at first, but no one wants—that is, I gave it up. I just hate going from place to place and being turned down."

Clifford wondered angrily how anyone could turn her down. She was as bright and pretty as a little bird, he thought. He knew her first name was Penny, and he thought how once it must have suited her perfectly, for her hair, which was threaded with gray now, must have been bright and coppery. "Well, I certainly don't know what things are coming to, when they replace everybody with machines," he said.

"Oh, I guess there was more to it than that," she said vaguely, but when he would have asked her what she meant, she changed the subject and inquired, "Do you come to this

park often, Mr. Macklin?"

"I wish you'd call me Clifford," he smiled.

"Well then, you must call me Penny. And do you come here often?"

"Oh, every now and then."

"How nice. Then we'll run into each other, I'm sure."

The next time they met he offered to walk her home. She lived on a quiet, shaded street with small front lawns and small back gardens. Her house was tiny, almost cottage-size, white with blue shutters. She invited him inside, and he saw that everything looked as he would expect it to—clean and white walled, simply furnished. Everything brightly polished, shining, with a pot of pink begonias on a deep windowsill. He pictured his own house, its windows darkly curtained, all surfaces plastic, Gladys's wax fruit still on the dining room table.

"Your house looks like you," he said, and watched the faint, becoming color rise to her cheeks.

The first thing he did when he got home was to throw the wax fruit into the trash can.

Now and then when they met, the subject of the Mel-Mar company came up. Sometimes, inevitably, they reminisced. Other times they speculated.

"I'd like to have seen the office yesterday, when all the power went out in that storm," Penny said.

He nodded. "First of the month, all the bills to get out—"

"And all that expensive equipment not working."

They both smiled, contemplating it, and then she said, "We shouldn't gloat."

"No, I suppose not." It was a cool, dark day, too chilly for the park, and they were sitting before a fire in her living room. Clifford had never known a place where he felt so comfortable.

"How was the company doing the last few months?" he asked idly.

"Not well, I think."

"How about my route? Many orders?"

"Goodness no. No comparison with when you were selling."

"How's Jack Ludlow doing?"

"Mr. Melvin promoted him to sales manager. But everything was different—it never was the same after you left, Clifford."

True or not, it warmed him to hear her say it.

"And promoting him to sales manager—well, I don't think *that* was a very good move," she added. Some hesitation in her tone made him glance at her.

"Why not?"

"Oh . . . there's something very . . . unreliable about Mr. Ludlow. Actually I think that's

why—" She hesitated.

"Why what?"

"Why they let me go."

"What do you mean?"

"He's not quite honest."

Clifford realized that this did not surprise him. "And you found him out?"

"It wasn't hard. He began to write checks, you see."

"Was he authorized?"

"No one's authorized except Mr. Melvin."

"He signed Harry Melvin's name to them?"

"Yes. And I could tell. I think it's why they got rid of you, too, Clifford. It was Jack Ludlow's doing. He knew you'd have been in his way—you'd have been too smart for him."

"Did you say anything to him about the checks?"

"No. But I'm sure he knew I was onto him."

"But Harry's sure to find out—if he hasn't already."

"I don't think he wants to know. Unless Jack Ludlow did something really outrageous, I don't think Mr. Melvin would call him on it. I don't think he could, really. He'd just accept the loss."

Clifford thought of Harry Melvin's wife, whom he had met once or twice. A greedy woman—he had seen it in her eyes. A strident, high-breasted, bossy type, and their daughter a carbon copy. He shook his head. "Poor old Harry."

"Yes—but I can't quite pity him. I just can't forgive him for what he did to you, Clifford."

Her loyalty moved him so strongly that he looked away from her suddenly. "This rain is going to be fine for your garden," he said. "Why don't I come over tomorrow to pull weeds?"

That day when he went home he took down Gladys's drapes from the windows. He was surprised to see how much light came in, even as dark as the day was. He decided he would think of other ways to spruce the house up and make it look a bit better, in case he decided to sell. It was not something he had considered before, certainly not when his children had suggested it. Now whenever he closed his eyes and thought about the future, especially in the moments just before sleep at night, he always seemed to see himself in Penny's house with its little garden and blue shutters.

He decided to clean the place up at least, starting with the dining room and its sideboard, a looming ugly piece of furniture that he had always detested. It was full of plastic dinner plates with swans in the centers, plastic place mats, plastic tablecloths with flowered borders. His heart began to feel lighter as he took the stuff out and piled it on the dining room table to discard. But

halfway through, a better idea came to him. Why not sell it along with the house? Get rid of it all—furniture, dishes, linens—everything. Even if it didn't work out with Penny—he could hardly bear this thought—he would take nothing of Gladys's with him. He would start fresh. The idea pleased him so much that he replaced everything. And just as he started to close the door, something in the corner of the shelf glistened, catching his eye. He reached for it and pulled out a key. For a moment he stared at it. Then with one dusty hand he slapped his forehead. He recognized the key to the Mel-Mar office, the one he had lost three years ago when his key ring broke. Searched high and low for it, he had, and finally had to have a duplicate made. Gladys must have found it and stuck it in there, never remembering to tell him.

He put it in his pocket, turned out the lights, and trudged upstairs to bed. He left the key on his bedside table and went to take a shower. When he returned, there was the key, still glistening in the lamplight. Clifford looked at it for a long time.

On the night he entered the Mel-Mar office, he dressed in a business suit, wore a tie and

gloves, and carried his old briefcase. If anyone should see him, he would look like what he had been all his life until the last two years, a salesman working overtime. Yet he preferred not to be seen, so he waited until late when the downtown streets were largely deserted. Then he let himself in quietly with the key. He moved at once to the small panel under the front counter where the burglar alarm was connected with the office of a private security agency. He pressed the button there, giving the code ring to notify them that the entry was a valid one by an employee of the firm. For a moment he stood looking around at the microwave ovens and rotisseries on display in the front showroom—nothing much new, he thought. Then he moved through the door in the frosted glass panel into the offices in back. He could see quite well, since low lights were always left on at night.

Everything looked familiar—the desks, the file cabinets, the stapling machines, the ashtrays, the light-starved philodendron plants on the desks. There was some new equipment—he saw screens and scanners—that was the new inventory control, no doubt. But not much had changed. He saw the low partitions that cut off the two private offices—H. MELVIN, PRES. was on one door, and

J. LUDLOW, SALES MGR. on the other. He glanced around the room again.

And felt nothing. Here he had been missing the place for almost two years, resenting his enforced retirement. Now he realized it was another life, no longer his. Why had he come here anyway? The thing he had contemplated had been an impulse, nothing more. Suddenly it seemed unimportant. What did he care about any of them? He glanced at the two doors, H. Melvin and J. Ludlow side by side, and saw two lives yoked in mutual dislike. A man of about his own age, Harry would be. Not completely a bad sort, even though loyal Penny resented him. Yet Harry Melvin would never know peace, for age or infirmity would finally compel him to give up, and then he would be obliged to hand it all over to Jack Ludlow and spend his last days watching the firm he had built die a slow death from incompetent management. He would live out his days invisible, with people focusing somewhere past his shoulder, and with no one to look into his eyes and see the real person that he was.

Clifford moved to the head bookkeeper's desk, which had been Penny's, and stood there for a moment remembering how it had looked then. Neat and orderly, all corners squared, all

ledgers and papers aligned, pencils sharpened, fresh flowers in a small white jug, or else a plant that would grow for her but for no one else. Now it had a stale, disheveled look. An ashtray emptied but unwiped, papers with curling corners, a scatter of pencils, even the center drawer unlocked and slightly open. Penny had always been conscientious about locking up before she left. The firm's checkbook was kept in that center drawer.

Clifford stared at it. He had almost made up his mind to leave without doing what he had come to do, but now suddenly it was all too easy, too simple to pass up. With one finger he pulled the drawer all the way open. The checkbook lay there as it always had. He slid it out and riffled through it thoughtfully. There were three checks to a page; about a third of the book was used up. He turned the pages to the halfway point and from the center of a page carefully tore out a check. He hesitated, turned more pages and tore out another one. Then he scrambled the drawer's contents, giving it a messy, rifled look. He wanted the loss to be discovered quickly. Then he let himself out without a sound.

Only when he was in the street and turned toward home did he find himself damp with perspiration, his heart pound-

ing and thumping wildly. Yet it was not elation, not the glorious one-up feeling that had accompanied his other adventures. There was dread now—jumpiness, even a cloudy, oppressive regret. What if he was apprehended? What if he didn't get away with it this time? What would Penny think of him? She would think, and rightly, that he was no better than Jack Ludlow—a common thief. His blood turned icy and thick, clogging his veins. His heart labored to pump it through.

The whole thing had stopped being fun. The life and spirit had gone out of it. In their place, sliding and sinuous, had come fear, and yes, shame. He kept his eyes down, staring at the toes of his black oxfords as he put one foot in front of the other all the way home. Sometimes he thought he heard other footsteps behind him, but he never dared look back.

He slept poorly that night and woke with his eyes burning and tired. His mouth felt dry. He dressed quickly, not even bothering to shave, and walked downtown hurriedly. He had to know if the theft had been discovered. Mel-Mar was just opening its doors. Through the plate glass window he saw the janitor sweeping out the show-

room, dusting the display appliances. Clifford ducked into the luncheonette two doors away, ordered coffee and bought a morning paper. He made himself spend a half hour there, looking at headlines and ordering more coffee. When he went out into the street again, he saw a man just arriving at Mel-Mar's front door. An older man with a double chin and baggy knees in his trousers. His hands were thrust into the pockets of his worn suit jacket, causing it to sag on each side. A detective, Clifford guessed. A uniformed officer, young and spruce and with a take-charge way about him, was already standing in the open doorway. Clifford thought he could read a faintly supercilious look in the young policeman's face, and he surmised that the detective might be close to retirement. The look was there. *Get lost, Pop.* Mr. Wilmot had said that to him. He could see the same words, unspoken, behind the young officer's eyes. He moved a little closer.

"Has anybody called the bank?" the old detective asked sharply, and in a voice loud enough for Clifford to hear. "Go tell them to call the bank right away."

The younger man said something. Clifford could not catch it all. "—just a routine break-in, I'd say. Things scrambled

around and—”

“No case is routine!” the detective snapped. “And you can’t be sure it was a break-in—keep your eyes open, boy.”

When the young officer moved to go inside, reluctantly and with only perfunctory respect, Clifford found himself curiously aligned in sympathy with the older man. He lifted his paper as if he were reading the front page, but over the top of it he kept his eyes on the detective, who was now examining the door, the sidewalk, the edge of the window. Suddenly the man straightened and looked toward Clifford. For a moment their eyes locked and held. Then to Clifford’s dismay, the man approached him. Clifford felt panic at his own unshaven face, tieless shirt. Did he look guilty?

“You work here, do you?” the detective asked him.

Clifford swallowed, straightened, folded his paper with a great deal of unnecessary motion. “Used to,” he said brusquely. “Not for some time, though.”

“Still come down for coffee?”

“Yes, well, old habit.”

“Thought I recognized you. I remember faces.”

Clifford tried to divert that line. “Trouble of some sort?”

“Yep, might call it that.”

“Sorry to hear it,” Clifford said, but talk was becoming dif-

ficult. That dryness in his mouth. “Well, good luck,” he said, and turned, tucking his paper under his arm in a casual gesture. He strolled off down the street, and just as he had heard footsteps the night before, now he felt the man’s eyes following him all the way out of sight. And again he did not look back.

All that day he stayed indoors, going back over the whole business to determine if he had made a mistake anywhere. But no, he was sure. He was sure. Oh, for a moment last night he had thought, wildly, how easy it would be to fill out a check for a comfortable amount, take it to the bank first thing in the morning and cash it, then leave town with Penny. (*Had that really been in the back of his mind when he first thought of this venture? Goodness no. Pure fantasy.*) But instead, he had done as he planned, torn the two checks up into small pieces and flushed them down the toilet. He wanted nothing from Mel-Mar. He had known that for sure as he stood there in the eerie half-light looking around the office. Not even revenge—only fairness, only what was right. And he had done it all carefully, not making any mistakes.

Hadn’t he?

A few days later he was on a

ladder cleaning the storm gutters on Penny's house while she did her marketing. Twigs, seeds, leaves, acorns, all had accumulated there and clogged the drains. He felt happily domestic. Penny had fussed around him before she left and warned him to be careful on the ladder. When she returned carrying her bag of groceries, her walk was quick and excited. She hurried over to him, bursting with news.

"Clifford, what do you think—there's something going on at Mel-Mar."

High up on the ladder Clifford froze and clung to the gutter until his heart stopped its wild panicky surge. Then he spoke down to her casually. "That so?"

"Yes. Just now I walked past and I saw a man coming out of the office carrying books and ledgers. I wasn't a bookkeeper all those years for nothing, Clifford. I recognize an accountant when I see one. They're having an audit."

Clifford swallowed and let go of the gutter. Slowly he climbed down the ladder and took the bag from her. "Well," he said. "What do you know." He followed her into the house to help put away the groceries. He knew what it meant. Harry Melvin in his heart knew that his son-in-law could not be trusted. Confronted with the fact of two

missing checks (*This looks like an inside job, to me*, the old detective would have told him), Harry had at last turned a deaf ear to Jack's protestations of innocence, called in an auditor, discovered the earlier forgeries. Maybe he had known about them all along but needed the impetus supplied by this real, overt crime to call up his own courage. Something outrageous, Penny had said. It would take something really outrageous to goad Harry into action. And he, Clifford, had supplied it. He felt warm satisfaction now at having done it. He wondered what Jack's punishment would be. No pressing of charges, nothing like that. Probably Harry wouldn't even fire the fellow—the women would never have it. But something would be done. Clifford had a good idea what it might be.

It was late summer before he saw his hunch verified. Then one morning as he was walking past Mel-Mar on the other side of the street, he saw a scowling Jack Ludlow come out, slamming the door behind him. He was carrying a sample case and had his suit coat hooked over his shoulder on one finger. The day was going to be hot; Jack's step was already weary as he trudged heavily up the block. Clifford, watching him, nodded to himself. Hitting the streets.

Back on the bottom rung. No longer sales manager but lowly order-taker. And Jack Ludlow would never find the joy in it that he himself had known, Clifford thought. He was satisfied. Mission accomplished.

Autumn turned the sunlight a deeper gold. A dusty mellowness softened the afternoons now. He and Penny planted tulip bulbs along the edge of her garden. He dug the holes and into each one she dropped a handful of bone meal and then tucked a bulb. Clifford breathed deeply, feeling at peace.

"I've made a decision," he said casually. "I'm putting my house up for sale."

"Oh my—really? Won't you miss it?" Penny selected a Queen of Bartigon pink and placed it deep in the soft darkness of the hole he had dug.

"No, I'll get a smaller place."

"But where?"

"Oh, I don't know—just a little apartment or a room somewhere." He was suddenly afraid to ask the question he had rehearsed, afraid of her gentle refusal.

"But just four walls—nothing to look at—" Penny sat back on her heels and looked at him in a troubled way. "No garden—you're so good in the garden, Clifford." Her two hands in their clumsy gloves reached out

for his. Her blue eyes sought his eyes and looked straight into their depths.

"That would be a shame, Clifford."

Walking home from her house later, Clifford felt a bursting elation, a lightness in his feet that quickened his step and made him want to skip. Yet the farther he walked, the more sidewalk that rolled out behind him in a long ribbon of separation from Penny, the more a cold lump of anxiety began to take shape inside him. The image of the box in the bank vault loomed up, bat-like, to claw at him. Cold and inert, yes, but if he were to walk into the bank and open it now, it seemed to him a coiled adder might reach out to strike him with deadly aim. How could he marry Penny—yes, yes, she had said yes!—with that mass of cold guilt and transgression lying in the bowels of the First Bank & Trust Company?

Clifford stopped walking and made a decision. It was the work of only a moment, that decision, yet as soon as he made it he felt that he had laid down an insupportable burden, cast off a great rough gunnysack full of rocks. He changed course and walked toward the Woolworth store, allowing himself the luxury of a few small regrets, a transitory wistfulness. He had, after all, shown a rather

remarkable aptitude for crime during his brief foray into it. He could even have done rather well at it, he thought. But the feeling was ephemeral. Sweeter prospects beckoned.

In the store he bought two packages of business envelopes. When he came out, he cut through the green park where he had first seen Penny sitting all those months ago. Thinking ahead, planning what he would do, he almost failed to see the man sitting on the bench with his newspaper. One leg was crossed over the other, one scuffed, round-toed shoe jiggling idly. Their eyes met. Clifford paused, recognizing the detective. He could see aimlessness in the man, an absence of urgency. People with time to kill all wore the same wandering look.

"Afternoon," Clifford said.

Recognition sprang into the detective's eyes. "Hi there." He looked Clifford over, even paying special attention to his package, but that was the habit of a lifetime, Clifford knew. It meant nothing. He felt safe again, secure in the decision he had made.

"Retired?" Clifford asked, but of course he knew already.

"Yeah." A hint of surprise, that he had hit the mark.

"How'd that work out—that case at Mel-Mar?"

"Oh, we got him."

"Inside job?"

"Yep. I said so, right from the first."

"Good for you," Clifford said warmly.

"Piece of cake."

"Well—so long." Clifford tipped a finger to his forehead in a little salute and walked off, jaunty and assured.

Next morning he went to the superette two blocks from his house and bought a loaf of bread and a roll of paper towels. Carrying the grocery bag, he went to the First Bank & Trust Company and waited for the door to open. He presented his deposit box key and, in the privacy of a small room, emptied the money from the box into the grocery bag, tucking it well down under the bread and towels and folding the top of the bag over. Then he turned in his key, surrendered the box, and thanked the young woman who had helped him.

At home he pulled the shades, then counted out the money carefully on the dining room table, arranging it in stacks and then placing it in the various envelopes he had laid out. Now and then he referred to a list he had kept, but most of the transactions he remembered. That evening after dark he returned it all, sticking the unmarked sealed envelopes into night depositories, shoving them

into mail slots. He even drove to all the out-of-town banks and businesses, overlooking none of them.

Except one. No matter how he tried, he could not bring himself to return the money to Wilmot's Men's Wear. *Get lost, Pop.* He could still hear Mr. Wilmot's voice hissing at him. You didn't forget something like that in a hurry. All the same, he knew he had to make restitution somehow.

Finally he put \$38.50 in an envelope and mailed it to the Chamber of Commerce Park Beautification Fund. It would have to do, he thought with a shake of his head. He could not bear to undo totally that one small victory.

Now only a single errand remained, and the next day—a fine fall day bright with wind and high clouds—he went by himself to the restaurant where he had eaten early in the summer. How much he had enjoyed his solitary freedom then, he recalled, and how little he cared about it now! Now he wanted only to be done and to hurry back to Penny so that the two of them could start making plans together. He ordered the same lunch as before, salad plate and coffee, and was pleased to notice, as he ate, that the same cashier was at the front

counter.

"Hasn't this place been redecorated recently?" he inquired as he handed over his check and a ten-dollar bill. "Last time I was here I believe it was blue."

"Yes, it was all done over last month," she said.

"Did you have something to do with picking the color?" he asked as she gave him his change.

"Well, they did ask what I thought."

"Aha. I knew it. Somehow I'd just pick you for a person with a good sense of color. Not many have it, you know. Color sense." She looked up at him, blushing with confusion, and he quickly handed her another ten. "I certainly couldn't do anything like that, not if my life depended on it," he said earnestly, still holding her eyes fast with his. "What it takes, you see, is a special perception."

"Oh, I don't know—"

"No, it's true. A psychologist would tell you."

She turned to the register, looking pleasantly flustered, and tucked the bill in the drawer. When she offered him change, he held out his hand to show that she had already given it to him.

He told her to have a nice day.

FICTION

The Third Jury

by David Braly



Illustration by George Thompson

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In a small town it is possible for every resident to share a bit of information that no one from outside that town has the slightest inkling of. Sometimes this knowledge is communicated—such as one resident's telling others where the best place to catch trout is on a particular stream—but other times it is merely understood.

In Grogansville it was ubiquitously understood that no young man other than Luke Yates was to notice Linda Paxton.

But John Fairchild was not a resident of Grogansville.

Luke saw Fairchild for the first time when Fairchild entered the Thunderegg Tavern. Fairchild wore a tweed jacket, an Oxford-cloth shirt, cords, and uppers. His clothes and well-groomed appearance separated him from the other men in the tavern, who were dressed in rough red clothes for the first day of hunting season.

Luke watched him walk to the bar, then ignored him. Luke was standing at the end of the bar with Sam Thompson and Eli Olds, talking about the day's unsuccessful hunt. Luke had brought his new rifle into the tavern, partly because he wanted to make sure that no one stole it from his pickup but mostly because he wanted to show it off. It was a Sako, loaded with Remington 7mm. magnum caliber rounds. If he couldn't show off his kill—and he couldn't, because he hadn't even seen a deer today—at least he could show off his gun.

Jean brought Luke another beer. He drank heavily from it. He knew he shouldn't drink more beer; he was broke and he was driving. But he was also thirsty and frustrated.

This evening Luke was having a good time. Once, he had always had a good time at the Thunderegg. That was when he was first old enough to enter, when he was working in the Cooligan Tool Company factory. But Cooligan and the big Krey Tire Manufacturing Company had both closed during the recession and never reopened. Grogansville's population had fallen from sixty-eight hundred in 1980 to fifty-one hundred in 1985 and was still falling because the unemployment rate had leveled off at eighteen percent. Luke was part of that eighteen percent.

The only good times left in Grogansville came in early June when the Grogansville Summer Festival attracted tourists from surrounding states. Now the Summer Festival was all that kept Grogansville alive.

Luke thought about that for a moment—the thought just floated in and then out again, the way it did at odd moments with all Grogansville residents—and then he turned back to his drink.

He was swallowing beer when he heard her laugh.

Luke knew it was Linda. He recognized that laugh. He hadn't known that she was in the tavern, but he would've recognized her laugh in a crowd of thousands.

Luke set his mug on the bar, turned, and looked.

Linda was seated at a table with Elaine Wilcox. The young stranger in the tweed jacket was bending over her, a glass in his hand, smiling.

"Who the hell's that?" asked Luke.

Sam and Eli looked to where Luke was staring.

Sam shrugged his shoulders. Eli said, "I don't know, but he ain't from around here."

"Looks like a college guy," said Sam. Sam was poor-proud and hated all college students on principle.

Luke sized up the stranger fast. He figured that he was about his own age, handsomer than he, but not nearly as strong. Luke could take him in a fight, but the stranger might beat him courting a woman. And the woman the stranger was paying attention to was the one woman in Grogansville he shouldn't be.

At that moment the stranger leaned over, whispered something in Linda's ear, and straightened up again, smiling. Linda blushed, then giggled.

Something snapped inside Luke.

He marched over to Linda's table, still carrying the Sako.

Luke walked around the table—Linda sucked in her breath when she saw him—to the stranger.

"Take a hike," he said, jutting out his big jaw and breathing hard through his nostrils.

"What?"

"You heard me, Slick. Beat it!"

"Luke, you let him alone," said Linda. "He was just talking to me, that's all. That's all."

"I said beat it."

"Mind your own business," said the stranger.

"She is my business."

"Maybe you'd better go, John," said Linda.

"Yeah, go, John," said Luke.

"I have as much right to be here as anybody. And you have no right to interrupt our conversation and—"

Luke spat in his face. "Beat it!"

For three seconds John Fairchild was too astonished to move, to

think. Then—furious—he dived into Luke, his elbows forward to push into him the way a football player would.

He hit Luke hard, knocking him over.

Luke went sprawling backwards onto the floor, the barrel of the Sako falling against his forehead and gashing it. Blood oozed from the gash.

"You stinking—" sputtered Fairchild "—stinking—stinking—stinking—"

"Why you little—" began Luke.

Fairchild grabbed a table knife off Linda's plate and raised it in a stabbing position.

Luke, suddenly frightened, slid backwards on the floor as Fairchild stepped forward.

"Stay back!" ordered Luke, raising his Sako and pointing it at the stranger.

Fairchild—knife high, grimacing—took another step.

Luke fired.

Fairchild collapsed onto the floor.

Elaine screamed, then Linda, then a woman at another table.

Luke stared at the stranger for several seconds. The fear left him; replaced by anger—then fury—that a guy in tweed had scared him, Luke Yates, even momentarily. And everybody saw it happen.

Luke stumbled to his feet.

He looked down at the fellow in the tweed jacket. There was no blood, but he wasn't moving. Luke could feel the eyes of everyone in the room on him.

Luke calmly raised the Sako again, aimed it at the stranger's head, and squeezed the trigger.

Fairchild's head exploded as if it were a tomato hit with a hammer.

Only later, when an autopsy was performed, did Luke learn that his first shot had missed Fairchild entirely, that apparently the concussion of the bullet passing by his ear had knocked him out. By then, of course, Luke was in jail.

The trial was held during the last week of May.

It drew statewide attention. Lawyers from nearby communities came to study the courtroom tactics of the prosecutor and defense attorney. Print and broadcast media from all over the state were represented. Even a sensationalist reporter from the *National Dissector* came. For the college student Luke

had killed had been a son of Nathan Fairchild, chairman and chief executive officer of Fairchild Industries, Inc.

Nathan Fairchild himself moved into the local hotel. At first people thought that he'd come as a grieving, perhaps vengeful father, intent upon making sure that justice was done to the murderer of his son. There was even a rumor that Fairchild would hire a hit man to kill Luke if the hometown jury did the expected thing and acquitted him on grounds of self-defense.

But this view of Nathan Fairchild changed dramatically when the local weekly announced that he had purchased the old Krey Tire Manufacturing Company. Apparently the shrewd industrialist had not been able to pass up a bargain, even in the town where his son had been killed. Fairchild had allegedly paid only eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the factory, the two big black and orange warehouses, the retreading plant with its peeling paint and broken windows, the old dump west of town with its million unretreadable tires, the shuttered-up office building on Main Street, and the antiquated fleet of six inoperable semis and ten small rusting flatbed trucks.

Then another rumor spread: that Fairchild had bought Krey to influence the jury. If they convicted Luke, he would reopen the factory, putting hundreds of people to work; if they acquitted Luke, he would sell everything for scrap, eliminating forever the possibility that Krey might reopen.

Nathan Fairchild himself gave no explanation for buying the Krey company.

He never spoke as he walked to the courthouse every morning, walked back to the hotel every afternoon, or when he sat over a meal in the Opal Cafe.

"It was cold-blooded murder," said District Attorney Roy Alston in his summation to the jury. "Luke went over to that table with the intention of causing trouble. And he caused it. When John Fairchild came at Luke with that little butter knife, Luke had every legal right to defend himself by the use of force. And he did. But then, when Fairchild lay unconscious on the floor, the danger to Luke was over. Over, ladies and gentlemen. And at that point he had no right to inflict any harm upon John Fairchild."

Alston took a deep breath, then continued:

"Fairchild was unconscious. The bullet from Luke's gun had apparently whizzed right past his ear, and its concussion had knocked him out. He was harmless. Absolutely harmless, ladies and gentle-

men. Like a boy asleep, he was. He certainly posed no threat to Luke Yates.

"But what did Luke Yates do? He cold-bloodedly took his rifle, calmly aimed it at that sleeping boy's head, and pulled the trigger. He *murdered* him.

"We are not asking that Luke Yates be sent to the gas chamber, although in this state we could. We are asking that you, the jury, find him guilty—as he is guilty—of first degree murder.

"Now, some of you are going to think that the charge should be second degree murder, because this happened during a fight and wasn't premeditated. You can make a finding of second degree murder, of course, but I urge you to return a verdict of first degree murder because really that's what it was. When Luke Yates pulled that trigger for the second time, the fight was over, with his opponent unconscious at his feet, and Luke wasn't faced with any threat or involved in any fight."

The defense attorney was Clyde Johnson, who had been practicing law in Grogansville for thirty years. Johnson was a good criminal attorney who was sought out by felons from neighboring counties. He was high-priced, too, but was giving his services to Luke at a discount because Johnson was married to Rita Yates, Luke's aunt.

"Murder, my foot!" began Johnson.

Everyone in the courtroom laughed at this unconventional start of a rebuttal argument; even members of the jury.

"Wasn't murder. No, sir! Self-defense, and we all know it.

"Luke isn't a murderer. Luke's lived here for all of his life. We all watched him grow up. Especially me 'cause I'm married to his aunt. He's my nephew. I'm not always quick to admit it, but he is."

Again the audience laughed.

"Luke is a scrapper, there isn't anyone denying that. He's got into his share of fights. Most kids do who are worth a darn.

"But, murder? Never! Not Luke. Not any boy in this community that I know of.

"What are the facts? The facts are that this man Fairchild went over and started talking to Linda Paxton, who we all know is Luke's girlfriend. Now Linda testified that he was just joking around with her and Elaine. But Luke thought he was bothering her.

"So what did he do? He did what was *natural* for him to do. He

went to his girl's rescue. He walked over and told Fairchild to leave. It's true that he had that rifle with him, but he didn't even think about that. He'd been carrying it all day, had it in his hand long before he saw Fairchild, and didn't take it over there to use it on Fairchild. He didn't raise it until Fairchild came at him with a knife.

"Now, we'll admit freely that Luke hadn't ought to have spat in that man's face. That just wasn't proper manners, even for Luke."

People laughed again.

Judge Richards gaveled them into silence.

"But he was mad. We all know how these slick-looking know-it-all city guys can get on a man's nerves. Luke told him to leave, but the man wouldn't leave. And Luke, remember, thought that Fairchild was bothering little Linda. So when this slick-looking fellow started talking about his rights when he was clearly on Luke's turf, well . . . Luke just naturally let it fly."

Several people chuckled.

"But then what did Fairchild do? Raise his fists and have it out with Luke like any normal man would? No! He grabbed the knife off Linda's plate and came at Luke, intent upon killing him or doing him other bodily harm."

"Objection," said Alston. "No one knows what John Fairchild's intentions were because he's no longer alive to tell us."

"Sustained," said Richards.

Johnson cleared his throat, then continued: "So what did Luke do? He defended himself. He happened to have his hunting rifle with him, and he used it. The prosecutor would have you believe that the two shots were unrelated, but I submit to you that they were part of the same, continuous action."

"A fight is underway. Luke is knocked to the floor by Fairchild. Fairchild comes at Luke with a knife. Luke fires. Fairchild falls to the floor, then Luke in hot anger jumps to his feet and fires again. Hot anger! A fight underway! No rational thought, my friends. Just anger and mutual combat. It could've as easily been Luke that was killed as Fairchild."

Johnson turned and pointed at Luke. "Are you going to send that boy we all know to prison for the next twenty years because he defended himself from a knife-wielding stranger who he believed was bothering little Linda?"

It took the jury only forty minutes to rule Luke not guilty by reason of temporary insanity.

More than three thousand tourists came into Grogansville the day before the Summer Festival was to begin. Every hotel and motel room in town and every campground space near town was occupied. The restaurants and fast-food joints raked in money as never before.

But it was only the preview of what was to come. Tomorrow, when the Festival began, people from the surrounding counties would come to Grogansville. Altogether, the Chamber of Commerce estimated that there would be about five thousand people in town for the first day of the Festival. The Festival would last two weeks, drawing more than a thousand visitors each day, and organizers anticipated eight thousand for the final day of the event when the horse race would be held out at the fairgrounds.

The evening before the first day of the Festival was a happy time. Local people and visitors alike strolled the sidewalks of Grogansville. Teenagers cruised the main streets in their automobiles under the watchful eyes of municipal policemen. A spotlight, located at Uddelman's Super Market, swept the skies above Grogansville, its beam going around and around like the beams at a big airport.

Everyone was happy. No one remembered John Fairchild, or even last week's trial.

It was about nine fifteen when a traveler stopped at Toni's Pizza Parlor and phoned the police with the news that a field fire was burning beyond the hill on the west side of Grogansville. A county deputy drove out to investigate, and reported back by radio that there was indeed a fire and it was a very big fire.

The dispatcher pushed down the buzzer for the fire alert, and throughout Grogansville volunteer firemen heard it on their scanners. Then she depressed the button that started the fire alarm, and within seconds its shrill scream could be heard throughout town.

The county deputy, Will Clark, reported by radio that the fire appeared to be burning across a field about a mile north of the road. He said that even a mile away he could feel its intense heat. He also said that there was a cyclone fence beside the road, and that the only road going toward the fire was barred by a massive iron gate. The gate was padlocked.

While the volunteers came together at the fire hall, Clark drove along the cyclone fence looking for another entrance. He found none.

While the fire trucks climbed the hill road, Clark radioed the sheriff that the trucks would find their passage barred by the gate and fence.

"Take the gate down," ordered Sheriff Sullivan, "or shoot off the padlock."

Clark shot off the padlock, and opened the gate.

People in town now saw the great red glow in the black western sky. Occasionally—although the fire was eight miles away—they saw flames shooting upward.

Residents and visitors alike stopped what they were doing to watch the great red ball in the west. People who had been inside their houses came outside to watch at the urging of neighbors, saying "ooh" every time a particularly large flame jumped up.

The fire trucks reached the fire, but the volunteers had to keep away because of the intense heat. The fire chief sent for bulldozers.

By then the chief knew it was not a field that was burning.

"It's tires," he radioed. "Tires in the old Krey dump for unretreadables, and they're burning hot as the sun."

Tankers and bulldozers climbed the hill all through the night, going to join the battle against the flames that had engulfed the one million tires.

They did manage to contain the fire, but they could not put it out.

The rotten egg odor of the sulphur drifted into town with the smoke the following morning. Some of the visitors brayed it until early afternoon, but most left as soon as the odor arrived.

The fire burned for two months, and during that time the smoke and the sulphur odor dominated Grogansville. The Summer Festival attracted no tourists, and was canceled the fourth day. Many Grogansville residents left town until the smoke and odor ceased. More than half the motel and campground operators went broke.

Everyone knew that Nathan Fairchild was responsible. They knew now that he had bought Krey Tire Manufacturing solely to obtain the tire dump, with the premeditated purpose of setting it on fire if his son's killer walked free. But no one could prove that. No law officer even questioned Fairchild.

But the hometown boy whom the hometown jury had set free soon left Grogansville. Luke got tired of people wrinkling their noses when they saw him.

This fall NBC has been bringing us an updated version of the famous television series, Alfred Hitchcock Presents. In hopes that our readers will enjoy an additional backward glance at some of the actual stories Mr. Hitchcock adapted for his own series, we bring you this first of several to be reprinted in the next few months. Henry Slesar's "The Deadly Telephone" was aired on May 29th, 1960, under the title "Party Line." It originally appeared in the January, 1960, issue of AHMM.—ED.

The Deadly Telephone

by Henry
Slesar



Illustration by Sheila Smith

Mrs. Parch was labeling preserve jars in the dining room when the telephone rang, and she paused in her labors to count the identifying rings. *One*, Mrs. Nubbin, *two*, Mrs. Giles, *three*, Mrs. Kalkbrenner, *four* . . . It was her own and Mrs. Parch, sighing with a reaction close to disappointment, wiped her sticky fingers on the generous folds of the apron and walked

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into the living room. It was only a thirty foot distance, but she was panting by the time she unhooked the receiver. Mrs. Parch was stout, her figure bell-shaped in the formless gray dress she wore every weekday. "Hello?" she said loudly into the mouthpiece.

"Is this Mrs. Helen Parch?" It was a man's voice, not familiar to her. Her answer was almost resentful.

"Yes, this is Mrs. Parch. Who's this?"

"My name is Atkins, Mrs. Parch, and I'm with the county sheriff's office. I wonder if it would be convenient for me to drop in and see you this afternoon? There's something rather important I have to talk to you about."

"Important? Are you sure you have the right party?"

"I'm sure, Mrs. Parch. It won't take very long. I'm in Milford at the moment, and it'll only take me five minutes to drive out to your house."

"Well, I don't know." She was plainly flustered. Even familiar visitors were few in the rural stretches of the county, and thought of a stranger . . . "Can't you tell me over the phone, Mr. Atkins? I'm kind of busy today."

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Parch. I'm sorry . . ."

"Well, all right then. Now's as good a time as any, so I'll wait for you."

"Thank you," Mr. Atkins said gravely, and waited politely for the woman to break the connection. She did, and then looked at the silent instrument with wonder. It was no use going back to her preserving chores because Mrs. Parch knew that the phone would be ringing again in another few minutes, just as soon as her eavesdroppers thought a decent interval had passed. She was right, of course; eight minutes later, it gave four short rings, and she heard the flat, nasal voice of Mrs. Giles.

"Helen? How are you? Just thought I'd call and see how things are."

"Uh-huh," Mrs. Parch said, knowingly but without cynicism. She had shared this party line for almost fifteen years, and it was common knowledge that its members participated in all calls. The open accusation would have shocked all of them, but it was true, nevertheless. "How's Jacob?" Mrs. Parch said casually, preserving the rules of etiquette. "I understand he's been re-siding the barn last couple of days."

"Yes, he's been busy," Mrs. Giles said vaguely. "Well, what's new with you, Helen? Anything interesting happen?"

Mrs. Parch pursed her lips, feeling a sudden defiance. She knew that Mrs. Giles was burning with curiosity about Mr. Atkins, but she wouldn't give her the satisfaction of talking about it. "No, nothing new," she said smugly. "Just finishing up my preserves is all. Part I hate worst of all is making labels. I can hardly hold a pencil with this arthritis of mine."

"You sure that's all?" Mrs. Giles said. "I heard your phone ring a minute ago . . ."

"It was just Mr. Hastings," the woman said coldly. "Calling about my mower. Took it in the other day for sharpening."

"Oh," Mrs. Giles said, and Mrs. Parch chuckled silently somewhere in the vastness of her bosom. She knew that Mrs. Giles recognized the lie, and she also knew she could never be accused of it. Mrs. Giles sniffed into the receiver, said a few more polite words to give the conversation an air of normality, and hung up.

When Mrs. Parch went back to the dining room, she was grinning broadly with satisfaction. Five minutes later, there were three rings, and she scurried across the floor on her tiny feet and noiselessly lifted the receiver, covering the mouthpiece with her hand. It was Mrs. Giles, of course, telling Mrs. Kalkbrenner about the strange man who was paying a call on Mrs. Parch that very afternoon. They speculated as to its meaning, and neither seemed able to satisfy their curiosity.

Mrs. Parch hung up before they did, and went into the bedroom to make herself somewhat more presentable for her expected visitor. He arrived a few minutes later, a lean man with bony ribs that showed through his sweated shirt. He carried his jacket over his arm, and he was mopping at his high balding forehead with a crumpled handkerchief. "Mrs. Parch?" he said. "I'm Daryl Atkins of the district attorney's office."

"Come on in, Mr. Atkins. Well, you certainly made good time."

"Got here as fast as I could. This kind of thing, well, even a couple of minutes can make a difference." He looked around the small, cosy parlor, its shade drawn against the sunlight. "Certainly a lot cooler in here," he said. "Must be ninety on the road."

"Maybe you'd like a cold drink."

"I would, ma'am, but not until we have a talk."

He took a seat on the sofa, sitting tentatively on the cushion without putting his damp shirt against the antimacassared back. Mrs. Parch sat in the rocker and folded her plump hands in her lap, waiting patiently.

"Mrs. Parch," he said, "do you remember a man named Heyward Miller?"

"Miller?" She screwed her face up reflectively. "No, the name doesn't sound familiar. 'Course there's Mrs. Miller at the post office; I don't suppose there's any connection."

"No, no connection." He frowned, and looked at the tasseled rug at his feet. "Heyward Miller and his wife lived out at the old Yunker place, maybe eight, nine years ago. They were only here six months when his wife died and he sold the place to the Kalkbrenners. Does that help you to remember, Mrs. Parch?"

She scratched her cheek lightly. "I do remember *something* about him. Yes, now I do." Her breath became shorter, and she put one hand on her bosom. "Oh, yes, Miller. That awful man! How could I forget about *that*?"

"I thought you'd remember, Mrs. Parch, I mean, after those things he said about you. He was a mighty disturbed fellow, the way I heard the story. Of course, I don't really know the whole truth; so it's not my place to pass along any opinion . . ."

Mrs. Parch drew herself up stiffly. "The man was a fool," she said harshly. "You ask anybody about him. He just didn't *belong* out here."

"Well, just for my own sake, Mrs. Parch, could we talk about what happened? Just for the record?"

"I've got nothing to say about it."

Atkins sighed. "The way I was told the story, this man Miller and his wife were married about a year when they bought the Yunkers' place. She was going to have a baby in three months. Only something happened one night; she got sick, very sick, and he tried to put through a call to the doctor . . ."

Mrs. Parch closed her eyes and clenched her fists on her lap.

"Now, I wasn't in the county at the time, you understand, so all I can do is report what I was told. But as I understand it, Miller got on the phone and you and another lady were talking. Swapping recipes or something like that."

"It was Mrs. Anderson," the woman said quietly. "I was talking to Mrs. Anderson."

"She still live in the neighborhood?"

"No. Her and her husband moved to California five years ago, and she died."

"Anyway," Mr. Atkins said, mopping his face, "this man Miller asked if you'd get off the line so he could call the doctor for his wife."

The story I hear is that you both refused."

"He was rude," Mrs. Parch said. "He was downright insulting to us."

"Yes. Nevertheless, you wouldn't get off the line, and Miller couldn't get through. Matter of fact, he claims you stayed on deliberately so's he couldn't get through."

"That's a lie!" Mrs. Parch said passionately. "We talked just as long as we had to, and no longer."

"But he didn't get the doctor in time, that was the whole point, wasn't it? And his wife died."

"Now look here, Mr. Atkins—"

The thin man raised a bony hand. "Please, Mrs. Parch, I didn't come out to rehash the past. All that is your business and none of mine. Except that something happened this morning, and it sort of *makes* it the business of the county sheriff's office."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't reckon you know what happened to Miller after he sold his place to the Kalkbrenners. He was pretty broken up about losing his wife and all, he moved to New York City. Six months later, he got in trouble for breaking into a hardware store. Didn't take anything but a few boxes of nails and stuff like that, and he was sent to prison for about six months. It was in prison that they decided he was mentally incompetent, and he was remanded to a state institution. He's been there ever since, almost eight years. Only now he's got away, Mrs. Parch, and that's why we're a little concerned."

"Got away?" The woman crumpled the hem of her apron into her hand. "How do you mean, got away?"

"Escaped. We got the news late last night, but it's over a week since it happened. Somebody at the institution thought of notifying us, since Miller used to do a lot of raving about . . . well, what happened. Kind of made us uneasy, Mrs. Parch. I guess you can understand that. Now we don't know for *sure* that he wants to make trouble for you, but it didn't seem right to take any chances. You see what I mean?"

Mrs. Parch stood up, the bell of her dress swaying slightly. Her voice quivered when she said: "You mean you think Miller is after *me*? For what happened eight years ago?"

"The man's not to be trusted," Atkins said quietly. "That's the whole point. The institution was maybe two hundred miles from here, but if he was really out for—well, I guess you'd call it re-

venge—that's not such a distance to travel. I wanted to warn you about the possibility, that's all."

She put her hands to her face. "But I'm all alone out here!" she said. "He could murder me in my sleep!"

"We're really not *sure* of anything, Mrs. Parch. I don't want you to get that idea. But if you could get a neighbor or somebody to stay with you for a few days, or else visit a relative or something, it just might be a good idea."

"Can't the sheriff protect me?" She caught a sob in her throat.

"I'm afraid that's not possible right now, Mrs. Parch. Not unless we had more positive information that Miller was in the vicinity. The way things are now, this is just a wild surmise. You understand?"

"Yes, yes," she said numbly. "Maybe I could go to my sister's place. In Cedar Falls . . ."

"That might be a good idea."

"I haven't seen her in ten years. We never got along, my sister and me."

Mr. Atkins smiled. "There's always a good time for a reconciliation, eh, Mrs. Parch?" He stood up. "Listen, I didn't come here just to alarm you. There's nothing definite about this, nothing at all. If we learn anything further, we'll call you up just as soon as we do. And if you have any reason to get in touch with us, just ask for the county sheriff's office. Speak to me personally. You remember the name?"

"Atkins," Mrs. Parch whispered.

"Daryl Atkins," the man said. Then he smiled broadly, and stood up. "I sure wouldn't mind that cold drink now, Mrs. Parch."

Atkins' automobile wasn't five minutes out of her driveway when the telephone jangled four times. She answered it, and heard Mrs. Giles say: "Helen? Did I see a car stop at your place?"

"No," she said raspingly. "You didn't see any car."

"But I thought *sure* I—"

"Mind your own business!" the woman said angrily. "Can't you ever learn to mind your own business?"

"Well!" Mrs. Giles said. She hung up, and Mrs. Parch cursed the fact that she hadn't done it first. A few minutes later, the telephone rang three times, but she ignored it. Instead, she went upstairs as rapidly as her weight and failing breath allowed, and began rummaging through the bureau drawers for the telephone number of her sister in Cedar Falls. She found it at last, among an album of

yellowed snapshots, and brought the scrap of paper downstairs. She picked up the phone receiver without any attempt at surreptitiousness, but Mrs. Giles and Mrs. Kalkbrenner had already concluded their conversation concerning her bad manners. She dialed the operator, and had to wait almost ten minutes before they had a line cleared to Cedar Falls. Even then it did no good because the Cedar Falls operator reported that her sister's telephone had been disconnected for the summer. It was just like Margaret, who had probably gone to the beach house, to save a few dollars by cutting off the phone service. She grunted angrily when she heard the news, and the unkind thoughts about her sister drove out all her fears about Miller for a while. She was even sufficiently recovered to complete the labeling of her preserves, and spent a busy afternoon hauling them down to the cellar. She was so preoccupied that when the phone rang five times (it was for Mrs. Ammons, a new neighbor) she didn't care enough to listen in, despite her natural curiosity. By evening, she hadn't forgotten about Atkins' warning, but her nerves had been soothed considerably.

It had been a long day. The sun had stayed high and hot, and it was almost eight thirty when it finally dipped behind the brown hills and let the cool night air take over. She made herself a simple supper of yesterday's leftovers, did a little sewing, and then settled down with a rental library novel to conclude the evening. The telephone rang twice, but she ignored it. A moment later, she heard a dog barking near the house. It was the Gileses' dog, an aging collie, not given to outbursts of canine temper. She wondered at it mildly, and put down the book. When the barking continued, she took off her glasses, got up, and went to the window. The sudden recollection of her possible peril sent a shock of fear through her body. She went to the front door, unlatched it, and looked outside, into the uninformative darkness. She closed it again, bolted it, and went to turn on an additional lamp in the parlor. The Gileses' dog stopped barking and began to howl, until someone applied the end of a rolled newspaper to its bottom. There was a clumping noise below, in her cellar, as if something had fallen to the stone floor, and she knew that she was no longer the sole occupant of the house.

She almost stumbled on her way to the telephone. When she picked up the receiver and heard Mrs. Giles's nasal voice, she gasped. "Please! Get off the phone!"

"Who's that?" Mrs. Giles said.

"Helen," Mrs. Parch said. "It's Helen! For God's sake, Emma, get

off the line, I have to call the police—”

“The police? Whatever for?”

“I don’t have time to explain! I have to call the sheriff’s office! Get off the phone! Get off the phone or I’ll be killed!”

Mrs. Kalkbrenner laughed. “Now, who’d want to kill you, Helen? You must be having nightmares.”

“I thought you said it was *preserves* you were putting up,” Mrs. Giles tittered. “Sure it wasn’t a little cider, Helen?”

“For heaven’s sake!” Mrs. Parch shrieked. “Get off the phone!”

“You see what I mean,” Mrs. Giles said significantly to Mrs. Kalkbrenner. “You see what I was telling you?”

“Umph,” Mrs. Kalkbrenner said. “I certainly do.”

“Some people just don’t know what courtesy means,” Mrs. Giles said. “It’s a good thing to really *know* your neighbors, isn’t it, June?”

“It sure is, Emma.”

“Please, please,” Mrs. Parch sobbed. “I’ve got to get through. I’ve got to use the phone—”

She dropped the receiver when she heard the sound of creaking stairs in the cellar. She ran into the kitchen and slammed the cellar door shut. The latch didn’t hold, so she put a chair against it, and ran back to the dangling receiver. She heard Mrs. Giles’s voice again, and screamed in hatred and terror. She was still screaming when the hand took the receiver from her and replaced it on the hook. It was a thick hairy hand, and possessed of terrible strength.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Other Woman

by Vincent Starrett

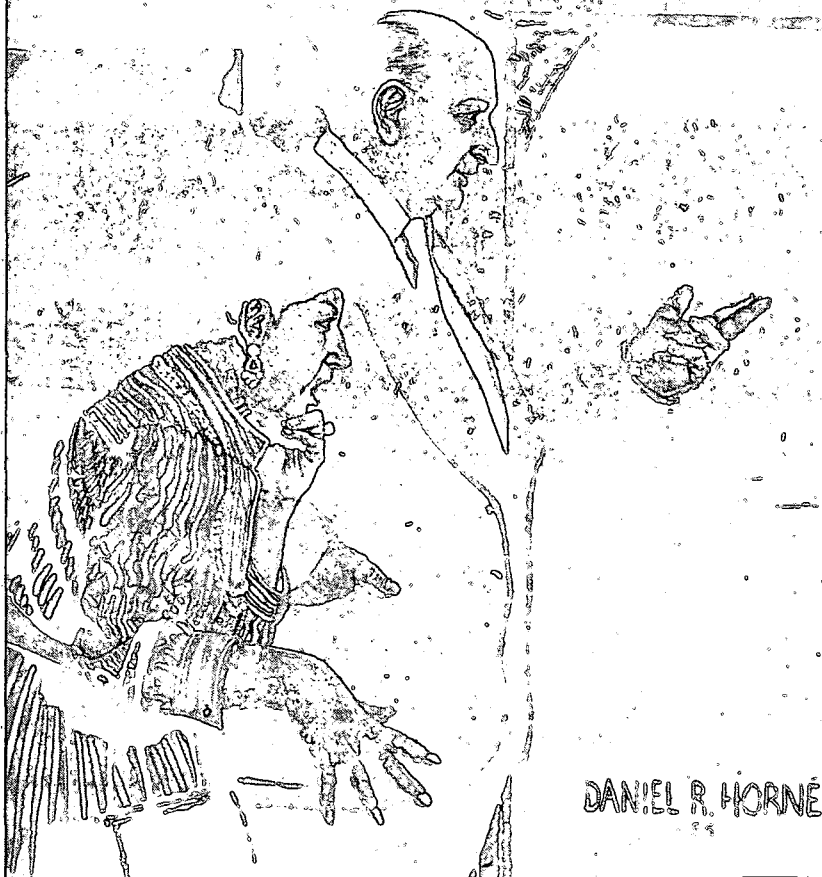


Illustration by Daniel Horne

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“You are Mr. Dulau?” queried the visitor in surprise, fixing her queer cold eyes upon the plump figure of the little detective.

The second occupant of the dingy office, who had bounded to his feet at the entrance of the haughty creature in green velvet, bowed profoundly.

“Yes, madame,” he replied; and there was a suave humility in his words and in his gesture that was as disconcerting as it was elusive.

The lady laughed in high falsetto, and the man was permitted to believe that the merriment concealed the ghost of an apology for the implication of the earlier speech.

“I’m sure I beg your pardon,” she continued, turning it into words. “From your reputation, I had imagined you to be rather a younger man.”

“And, no doubt, somewhat less gray and portly,” said the detective. “Paradoxically, the present age of wisdom entertains sad doubts as to the wisdom of age. If I can be of service to you, madame,” he added, “I shall be most happy to serve.”

The hand that held the glittering lorgnette twitched, as if it felt an inclination to rise. The lady stared. She was slender and well-preserved, although obviously Time had nothing left to offer her, save only age.

“I presume you can be discreet?” she inquired, at length.

“To the point of indiscretion,” said Alexandre Dulau, with another bow. “May I invite madame to be seated?”

She seated herself with a green velvet sound and a shrug that dismissed his peculiarities as she would have dismissed a disturbing doubt.

“You are a strange man, Mr. Dulau,” said the lady, “and in that your reputation does you no injustice. I am Mrs. Hopewell Grange!”

The man did not at once fall down and adore. Instead, he nodded brightly and repeated the name.

“Mrs. Hopewell Grange,” he murmured. “To be sure!”

“I have called,” continued the lady, “to ask you to perform a delicate mission.”

“I shall be happy to perform it.”

“It may be very difficult. I have myself failed. It is about my husband.”

“I commiserate with you sincerely.”

“You are not alone, Mr. Dulau. His absences are becoming the talk of the town.”

"Of that section of the town's inhabitants which madame honors by her acquaintance," corrected the little detective.

"Exactly," smiled Mrs. Hopewell Grange coldly, and again she stared suspiciously at the plump, gray-haired little man whose eyes were so disturbing, whose words seemed so significant. "I hope you will understand that my role is not that of the unhappy wife claiming to be misunderstood."

"I do not so understand, madame, although it must always be our chiefest consolation that we are misunderstood."

"Perhaps it is my pride that makes me wish to discover his secret."

Alexandre Dulau bowed for the third time.

"We desire to retain that which we possess," he said, "although by an apparent anomaly, only that allures us which we do not possess."

He seated himself at the farther side of the littered table. He leaned back comfortably and crossed one plump knee over the other. He placed the tips of his thumbs and fingers together and smiled seraphically.

"You are acquainted, perhaps, with my husband's name and position?"

"With both, I believe. He is Mr. Hopewell Grange, an operator on the Board of Trade, an official of the Commerce Association, and a director of the Jefferson Club. He is a Presbyterian, and a former member of the school board. His collection of postage stamps is the second in the country."

The lady's eyes widened by degrees until a white oval bordered the iris.

"Your information is amazing," she admitted, "and entirely accurate. He is also given to fits of melancholy, and occasionally," she added bitterly, "to extraordinary disappearances."

"It is about his disappearances that madame has been good enough to seek me out," nodded the detective. "I am attentive and sympathetic."

"They occur possibly once a month, on an average," said Mrs. Hopewell Grange, "and they are of no regular duration. He has never absented himself from home for more than three nights. The first experience dates back a number of years. In recent years, the absences have been more frequent than formerly. He goes to his office in the morning, and telephones that he will not be home that evening. There is no further explanation. When he returns, and I ask him where he has been, he replies that he has been away on

business."

"He is restless, perhaps, when he is at home?"

"Quite the contrary. When he is at home, he is apparently happy and content. He has everything to make him so. Possibly you are also acquainted with our circumstances?"

"You are what is termed wealthy, I believe. I have passed your home and looked upon it with admiration. It contains rare portraits and books, and an aquarium. Around it are conservatories and splendid estates."

The lady nodded casually. "You see, there is no reason for unhappiness. There is nothing that he cannot have if he wishes it. Our friends are numerous and include the best people in town."

"And madame's reasons for supposing that her husband's absences are *not* upon business?"

"Something in his eyes, in the tone of his voice, in his excessive courtesy and thoughtfulness at such times. There is mockery in everything. Everything conceals a falsehood. When I ask for details of the business that calls him away, my interest is discouraged; I am put off with words. I am told that I would not understand; that it is enough that he finds it necessary to go. Besides, what business would call him away at this time of life? His business is here and it is established. Younger men carry it on for him. But I have allowed him to think that he is deceiving me."

"It is frequently easier to let oneself be deceived than to struggle against deception," agreed the detective sententiously. "The clever person knows this—and makes capital of it."

"But I am most unhappy."

"Possibly there is no occasion for it, after all. When we are very happy or very unhappy, we become superstitious, and we discover signs and meanings in the most ordinary occurrences."

"I have followed him," said the lady, "but without result."

"Madame has herself followed her husband? Then it is, indeed, most serious. You suspect—another woman?"

"What else can I think?"

"There are happier things to think; but I understand madame's emotion. Tell me, please, of your pursuit."

"He had called me, late one afternoon, to say that he would not be home that evening. At once, I took a taxicab to his office. I was waiting in the cab when he emerged from his building. He went away on foot, and so I dismissed my driver. He walked for blocks, idled for a time in the park, and at length walked back as he had come. He entered an old building almost beside the one in which

he has his office, and disappeared. You know the business district of the near North Side? It is a hodgepodge of the old and the new; of great office buildings and converted residences. I entered quickly, and was in time to see him take an elevator. I watched the indicator, and the first stop was at the second floor. The second stop was at the fourth floor, and the third and last was at the fifth floor, which is the top. I visited all of these floors, but found no trace of my husband, nor did I see him leave the building again."

"Of course, he may have left the building while madame was carrying on her investigation upstairs. But what did you find upon those floors?"

"Old offices. It is a dingy building, occupied for the most part by theatrical agents and second-rate lawyers and cold cream salesmen. The rooms are dirty and old. Many were closed, and many unoccupied. I went into some, pretending that I had lost an address. I asked for a mythical Mr. Smith."

Alexandre Dulau smiled and shook his head. "He is far from mythical, this Mr. Smith," he said. "He exists in vast numbers. Madame was fortunate that she did not encounter him in every office she visited."

"Should I have asked for my husband?"

"Perhaps not. But what, in the end, was madame's conclusion?"

"I believe that he entered the building to throw off possible pursuit, and that later he went away to his ultimate destination."

"It is quite possible," admitted the little detective. "You did not repeat the experiment?"

"A month later I repeated it, and the same thing occurred."

"The same thing? Quite the same?"

"Quite the same. A long walk, then the park, then the old building. I dared not enter the elevator with him, and so again I lost him."

"But that is most fascinating! May I ask what streets your husband strolled, madame?"

"The office is in the Clementine Block, which is in Ontario Street. He walked on Ontario to the boulevard, on the boulevard to the park, and back as he had come."

"A delightful walk. And in the park? What did he do in the park, madame?"

"He fed the squirrels and the swans."

"That is all?"

"That is all—except that he looked at the water, and smoked a pipe. That is something he never does at home."

"Why does he not smoke a pipe at home?"

"I have never cared for the smell of a pipe, and so at home he smokes cigars."

"I see! But in his younger years he smoked a pipe? Before you were married?"

"Yes, and for a time afterward."

"You were not always wealthy?"

"We were never in poverty, if that is what you mean," replied Mrs. Hopewell Grange stiffly. "We began, perhaps, in a small way, and were very successful at once. I am at a loss to understand what this has to do with the matter in hand."

"It may be, nothing. I am an inquisitive old man, *n'est-ce pas?* I ask madame's pardon. It is her wish that I follow her husband when again he absents himself?"

"He will absent himself tonight. He announced this morning, as he left the house, that he would be away for a day or two."

"Then I must be quick, if I am to catch him. You entertained last night?"

"Yes, there was a large company at the house; but that is not unusual."

"And tonight? Do you again entertain tonight?"

"Tonight we are expected to appear at the home of a friend. It will be embarrassing to explain, as it has been embarrassing before. People are beginning to doubt, and to suspect."

"It must be embarrassing indeed!"

"It is ridiculous and unnecessary. I am determined to put an end to it."

"Exactly; and I am madame's unworthy tool. I must hurry if I am to succeed. I shall ask madame to excuse me."

"I shall hear from you in the morning?"

"In the morning, madame. The truth, of course, is what madame wants?"

"The truth, of course! Why else should I employ you?"

"Why else, indeed! The truth, of course. It is what we all demand to know, is it not? Yet if happiness be one's aim, falsehood must often remain the basis of one's existence. In madame's case, however, it is different. Falsehood, if she is correct, has operated to make her most *unhappy*."

"Of course I should be pleased to know that my suspicions are unfounded."

"Of course! But madame shall have the truth by morning, whatever the cost to her vanity."

"Vanity? You think then that it is wounded vanity that leads me to act?"

The detective bowed humbly. "We are never at a loss to discover a reason why we do not act from sheer vanity, madame; and immediately we are vain of the reason we have discovered."

Mrs. Hopewell Grange stared dubiously at the man she had employed to resolve her unhappiness. For an instant it occurred to her that it might be well to end the episode before it had begun, and to continue as her own detective. Then her husband's face rose before her, and she flushed angrily.

"Very well, Mr. Dulau," she said. "I shall expect your report in the morning."

II

"You have really traced him to his lair?" asked Mrs. Hopewell Grange eagerly, almost before the taxicab from which she had alighted had time to depart. "You *know* where he is, and where he has been? Tell me at once!"

Alexandre Dulau raised his twinkling eyes to the office building, halfway along the block, and brought them back to the raging eyes of the lady.

"I thought it well that we should meet here, so that you might see everything for yourself," he replied. "Yes, I am prepared to make my report, madame; but it will be more complete and understandable if you will accompany me over the ground I traversed in my investigation."

"Where is my husband?" demanded Mrs. Hopewell Grange, almost savagely.

"He is at his desk, at his office—there, in the building you know. He has been there since nine o'clock. We are now at the intersection of his street and the boulevard. It was here, yesterday, that I picked him up. Shall we move in his footsteps?"

He bowed courteously, and with a gesture indicated the sunlit stretches of the wide avenue. Unwillingly, she began to walk beside him.

"You are taking me to—?"

"To the very spot, madame. Within an hour, you shall know the truth."

"The truth!" she muttered, and set her small upper teeth firmly upon her lower lip.

"You will pardon me if I seem irrelevant and presumptuous, I

am sure," said the little detective, "but may I ask madame whether, in other years, she strolled as we are strolling now?"

"As we are strolling now? In this street, do you mean?" There was impatience in her voice. "Of course, I have strolled here. My husband and I walked here frequently, shortly after we were married. The neighborhood was not what it is today," she explained vaguely, "but we liked the trees, and—"

"And they are still beautiful, you would say, as the sunlight is still warm! It is true, madame. Perhaps these old buildings that we are passing are old friends, familiars of those other days. Ah, lucky, lucky youth!"

"I really do not recall many of them. It was a great many years ago. But tell me, Mr. Dulau, if you know, why it is that my husband always comes this way. Am I right in supposing him to be eluding pursuit?"

"Possibly, madame. Possibly encouraging it. Who can say? There were, of course, no motors and no buses in those days that your heart is now remembering, madame; and yet, I venture to suppose that the streets were no less charming? Tell me, did not the same children play in the streets? Did not the same—?"

"I do not remember the children," interrupted the lady coldly. "It is hardly likely, however, that they are the same. The streets seemed pleasant enough, as I recall them, but I prefer them as they are today. I am not an old fashioned woman, Mr. Dulau. Why do you speak in this manner? Is it that you fear to tell me the truth about my husband?"

"Courage, madame! The truth is not far distant. In time we shall come upon it, in all its pathos, in all its tragedy, in all its nakedness. I but prepare you for it, dear lady."

"With sentimental ravings about trees and children! I am not a child, Mr. Dulau, and I have employed you for a specific purpose."

"Which purpose I have understood, and which employment I have fulfilled. But see, we approach the park! I call your attention to the lordly elms and poplars, the lovely, spreading locusts. Surely in those other days you entered the park? Surely you paused beside the lake to watch the water rush against the rocks, to feel the spray upon your cheeks and in your hair? Come now, in that other time by which your heart is now so strangely moved, did not your husband tell you—foolishly enough perhaps!—that the blue of your eyes was no less lovely than that of this inland sea?"

"I believe you are quite mad!" said Mrs. Hopewell Grange. "Or is it that you are making fun of me? Tell me at once, Mr. Dulau:

have you traced my husband to his paramour, or are you deceiving me with words?"

"Indeed, madame, he has been traced and discovered. We are now but touching the landmarks of his progress."

"And is there—I demand to know!—is there another woman concerned in these absences of his?"

"Alas, dear lady, I am afraid that it is so! Yes, madame, sad as I am to have to tell you it, there is another woman."

"I knew it! I knew it! Oh, the beast, the fool! The insufferable animal! Who is she?"

"I beg of you to be calm. In a little while you shall know all. No single little thing shall I conceal from you. I ask only that you have patience. Shortly we shall turn back, even as your husband would turn back were he here today; as he will turn back this evening, when again he takes his stroll with his pipe. Please, please, my dear Mrs. Hopewell Grange! See, we are not far from the little lake where the swans float. It is there that your husband feeds crumbs to the great, stupid birds. What can be his reason for that, I wonder! Tell me, madame, somewhat of his past. It will be helpful to me. In his earlier years, did he care for the birds and squirrels?"

"He was mad about them, I think. He was crazy about all animals, although I fail to see how it bears upon his present misdemeanors."

"And sometimes you came here with him, to feed the swans; to laugh at the silly squirrels?"

"Often! He would not come without me."

"And you liked it, did you not? You adored it?"

"I was less enthusiastic than yourself. I did not mind it. We were young and silly, Mr. Dulau, as all youth is young and silly. Why do you recall it now?"

"That madame may understand why her husband fled from her to this other woman."

"Very well; I understand. He is just a fool, you are trying to tell me; in his second youth perhaps. It is a slim excuse, but it is kind of you to find it for him. Now let us turn back to the building."

Alexandre Dulau sighed deeply and halted his onward progress.

"Yes, youth is silly," he said, "very silly. Its dearest wish is to be grown up. And sometimes when it is grown up, it would give all it possesses to be young again. It shall be as you wish, madame. I had hoped that you would perhaps continue with me to the great lake, and allow me to smoke my pipe beside the rocks. But come!

"We shall turn back."

From his pocket he drew forth an antiquated pipe and screwed it together. This he filled with tobacco from an old pouch and placed it between his teeth.

"Madame does not object?" he murmured, plucking a match from its sheath.

"I *do* object, but you may smoke it, if it pleases you. You, at least, are no care of mine, after today. I abominate pipes, but I have no right to forbid you anything—even a pipe that is like the one I asked my husband to throw away."

"It *is* similar, is it not? I fancied your husband's pipe when I saw it, and so I have purchased one like it. And now, again, we approach the boulevard. Our return stroll begins. Conceive the happiness, madame, one feels in retracing old steps, in revisiting old scenes and glimpses, old happinesses and old loves, long vanished but unforgotten, long—"

Mrs. Hopewell Grange turned angrily upon her companion.

"This insanity has gone far enough, Mr. Dulau," she said. "You will please take me at once to the place you have discovered, the place my husband spends his nights away from me; or you will at once admit yourself an impostor and a fraud, defeated in what I have employed you to accomplish."

She raised an imperious hand to the driver of a speeding taxicab, which swung inward with a grinding of brakes and stopped to await their pleasure.

"As you wish, madame," bowed the little detective submissively. "We shall drive at once to the scene of your husband's infidelity."

No further words had been exchanged when they alighted before the ancient structure but one number removed from the greater edifice that housed the offices of Hopewell Grange. They crossed the sidewalk in silence, and entered the building. A waiting elevator received them; it was one of two, decrepit and wheezing. Then the lady spoke:

"What floor?" she asked abruptly.

"Ah, the floor, of course! I beg madame's pardon! Please take us to the third floor."

"The third?"

"Yes, madame. He walks down from the fourth."

The gate clanged shut, and then clanged open. They stepped out into a corridor long and bleak, punctuated at intervals by dusty glass-paned doors. Before a door at the end of the corridor they paused; and Alexandre Dulau found a key in his pockets.

The eyes of Mrs. Hopewell Grange were fixed upon a dingy fly-blown placard set into a crevice of the window pane. "Back in Five Minutes," it read in large characters; but the door itself suggested that the occupant of that room had gone forever.

They crossed the threshold, the detective quietly, the lady with rapid step and quivering nostrils. A dusty anteroom lay before them, across which they trod and through a door into a room beyond. Then Mrs. Hopewell Grange cried out in a strange voice and sat down quickly in a chair.

Yet it was a very ordinary room at which she stared, bewildered and incredulous. A plain, old fashioned sitting room, miraculously translated from some old apartment to this extraordinary setting. On the mantel were photographs and books; an old clock ticked on a corner shelf; against the wall stood a battered table covered with a quaint old colored cloth. On the table was a small jar of tobacco, and in a tray beside it an antiquated pipe. In a corner, a low couch was gay with a scarlet quilting.

The room was uninhabited, save for the two who had burst into it.

The lady continued to stare with wide, bewildered eyes. Then a slow flush stole over her features, and suddenly she arose from the chair that held her as if it had become hot. The angry flush still colored her cheeks as she spoke.

"The fool!" she said, and her voice was harsh as a rusty hinge.

"Yes, madame," replied the little detective, humbly, "there is a legend here, to that effect."

He indicated a small framed placard that hung upon the door behind her, and turning swiftly, in the printed handwriting of her husband, she read: "*This is the private residence of a sentimental old fool!*"

She turned to the detective.

"This is all? There is no other woman? You lied to me?"

"There is another woman, madame," answered Alexandre Dulau, "but she has never come. Perhaps he has hopes; perhaps his hopes are dead. I cannot say. I have never spoken with him. He has never seen me."

"It is merely a place for him to escape from himself? To smoke his old pipe? To sentimentalize over his old poverty? I do not understand it."

"An idea too clearly presented is often incomprehensible, madame, as a too-glaring light compels us to close our eyes."

"It is a place, then, to escape from *me*?"

"It has become so, perhaps. It may be that the other woman someday will arrive. I am not certain that he has given up hope. The capacity of man for self-deception is still a mystery to me."

"The fool!" said Mrs. Hopewell Grange again; then slowly she began to make her way around the room, stopping here and there to examine some object that seemed to be familiar.

She paused for a moment before the clock, ticking on its high shelf, and, reaching up, tried the broken lock that held its glass door in place. The pictures on the walls for a moment engaged her attention; the photographs upon the mantel. One portrait, framed in a small oval of silver, she picked up and carried to the light.

"What a fool!" said Mrs. Hopewell Grange for the third time, and whether it was anger or another emotion that vibrated in her throat, the little detective could not say.

"I wonder!" he mused, as quietly he eased himself through the second door and started for the elevator. "It is quite conceivable; and yet—I wonder!" He plunged his thumb into the call button.

What he wondered was whether Hopewell Grange was that which his wife had called him.

As he walked briskly away into the morning sunlight, he muttered: "It is possible that I have done Mr. Hopewell Grange a great disservice. On the other hand, it is possible that I have acted with my usual intelligence. She is at once relieved and disappointed, at once angry and full of thought."

But whether the other woman ever would return to Hopewell Grange, so complicated and incomprehensible are human emotions, was beyond even the ability of Alexandre Dulau to fathom.

SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED":

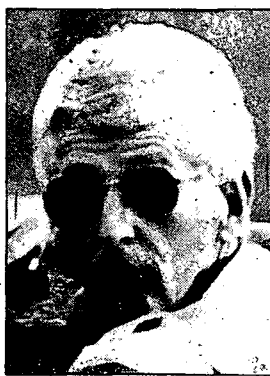
There are two clues to this seemingly cryptic puzzle: "seventeenth" and "pointless." One-seventeenth, expressed as a recurring decimal, is .0588 2352 9411 7647.

So it is a reasonable presumption that the other two numbers were 2352 and 9411.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

Photo by Susan Aiken McDonald



GREGORY MCDONALD

Everyone loves a rascal, and some of fiction's most memorable characters fall into that category. One thinks of a scamp like Huck Finn, and there's no repressing a smile.

I.M. Fletcher, known as Fletch, is just such a hero. He's eternally young, smart-mouthed, brash, and gutsy. He has his standards, though they aren't much belabored, and they're almost as unpredictable as Fletch himself.

There are, to date, eight adventures in the Fletch series, and one can begin reading them with any title. In fact, McDonald's newest book, *Fletch Won* (Warner Books, \$14.50, 265 pp.), is chronologically the first in the series. In it, Fletch

is a fledgling reporter at the *News Tribune* in sunny California. In barely three months he has so alienated his boss, Frank, that his future as a working journalist is in doubt. Thinking Fletch can get into no harm with the Donald Halbeck story, Frank assigns Fletch to cover an announcement the millionaire intends to make regarding a five million dollar gift to the local art museum. But when Halbeck is found shot to death in his car, parked in the newspaper lot, Frank quickly reassigns Fletch to an exposé of a brothel/health spa (pun intended). Fletch must get close to the brothel story (which he does admirably), crack open the Halbeck case, and continually escape the clutches

of shopkeepers and beat cops who repeatedly mistake him for a guy on a holdup spree. All of which should give you an idea of what *Fletch*'s life is like.

Fletch was the first to be published. Its cast of characters, conversational narrative style, and clever, tight plotting immediately gained McDonald attention and awards. *Fletch* was fresh, contemporary, iconoclastic, mercifully free of heavy-handed violence and psychologizing. Its hero was a winner, and its plot the neat puzzle variety that so few writers even attempt these days.

Confess, Fletch was published next, and introduced Boston's homicide detective (or is he, really?), Francis Xavier Flynn. *Fletch* is a bit older now (he dresses better, at least), and in Boston to do a little research into some paintings stolen from his Italian fiancée's father. *Fletch* follows the trail to a private Boston gallery. The difficulty is that he's also the prime suspect in a murder, the murder of a young woman whose corpse he discovers in the apartment he's using in Boston. *Fletch* and Flynn develop the kind of rapport that transcends the pages of the book they inhabit; Flynn went on to star in his own McDonald series.

There are six more *Fletch* books to enjoy, and each has its own special virtues. One of my

favorites is *Carioca Fletch*, set in Brazil at carnival time. McDonald has written so evocatively of Brazil, so graphically, that he makes the exotic seem mundane, and the commonplace unbelievably bizarre. But then that's Brazil, so he says. Topsy-turvy.

Fletch's Moxie has *Fletch* trying to help out his old friend, the Hollywood starlet Moxie Mooney. Her business manager is murdered—in front of the camera no less, during an interview with a popular talk-show host, on location on a beach. *Fletch's* best attempts to whisk Moxie away from the suspicions of everyone (police included) are largely foiled, and he finds himself hosting a house party of all Moxie's co-stars—and murder suspects.

There's a twist at the center of *Fletch's Moxie*, and there's one at the heart of *Fletch and the Widow Bradley*, too. *Fletch's* career as a journalist seems ended when one of his articles is published—an article liberally quoting the chairman of the board of a local firm, a man supposedly dead for more than year. To say more is to give the game away.

The other two *Fletch* novels are *Fletch's Fortune* and *Fletch and the Man Who*. Look for all eight books, all but the latest in paperback from either Avon Books or Warner Books.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

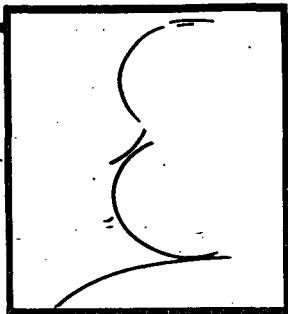
Ellis Peters and her incomparable detective, Brother Cadfael, have been subjects of a profile in this column. I'm pleased to report that all the nice things I said about her on that earlier occasion still hold true for this new entry. **Dead Man's Ransom** (William Morrow & Company, \$13.95, 190 pp.) again takes us back to Cadfael's Benedictine monastery-home in medieval England. This time an injured man, the local sheriff, dies before a ransom exchange can be completed. Cadfael uses his extensive knowledge of herbal lore and pathology (not to mention the human heart) to pronounce the death not accidental—but murder. As always, Peters paints her background in strong colors, and her characters are flawlessly rendered. And Cadfael—so endearing, so kind, so human—continues to prove himself more than worthy of a series.

Murder and the First Lady (Avon Books, \$2.95, 227 pp.) stars Eleanor Roosevelt in a lively episode of amateur detection during her years in the White House. It all sounds so accurate and authentic: the exchanges between Eleanor and the President, his nightly chats with Harry Hopkins over cocktails, his quiet times with his personal secretary of many years. That's not so surprising when one realizes that *Murder and the First Lady* was authored by that same First Lady's son. Elliott Roosevelt does a nice job of mixing mystery with history as Eleanor pursues a killer because she believes the major suspect—her young English secretary—is innocent. A jewel theft, a ringer, and a couple of other twists liven things up, and Eleanor Roosevelt proves to be as smashing and admirable as an amateur detective as she was in every other venture in real life. Can we hope for more tales starring one of our best-loved First Ladies?

Help the Poor Struggler is by Martha Grimes, another of our profiled authors. The growing number of Grimes fans won't be disappointed here. Inspector Richard Jury and Melrose Plant collaborate to solve a series of child killings, and this time they're joined by a new cop named Macalvie. The title of the book is, as always, that of a pub that's central to the tale; in addition to Macalvie, Grimes has given us (as a potential victim) the Lady Jessica Ashcroft, a spunky child heiress and orphan, and an altogether irresistible figure. A twenty-year old unsolved murder, a legacy of madness and revenge, and the characters of Macalvie and Jessica all add up to a more somber Grimes novel, perhaps, but also her most compelling. (Little, Brown and Company, \$15.95, 225 pp.)

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



The situation in *Péril* is one particularly favored by the French: the love intrigue of an older, married woman who takes a young lover, fears her husband's jealousy, and has a budding teenage daughter who is also attracted to the young man. In *Péril*, the wealthy wife seduces the young man soon after he shows up at her elegant home to give the daughter guitar lessons.

But the young man's life soon starts to unravel, either because the husband is taking revenge or because the wife is using him in some mysterious way, or both. He receives a videotape of his lovemaking; he is attacked in the dark; he is rescued by a kindly man who turns out to be a professional killer. Whom to trust? Whom to suspect? The dilemma is familiar enough from Hitchcock's well-titled *Suspicion* (1941), in which

Cary Grant may be planning murder, and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) in which Joseph Cotten may already be a murderer. In *Péril*, though, it is (if possible) even more difficult to penetrate character than in the world of Hitchcock.

The special problem presented by *Péril* is that there are no emotional giveaways—what are known in poker as the players' "tells"—showing through the behavior of any of the characters. Each of them speaks in clipped sentences bereft of intonation, making personal revelations in the most matter-of-fact tones. The listeners evince not the slightest surprise at what they are told.

The plot works in a similar way. Could the professional killer have just happened along at the right moment to save the young man from his attacker? Did the limping young woman

with a cane coincidentally move next door to the family with whom the young man gets involved on the very day he came for his guitar-teaching interview? As the plot darkens and finally moves to its complicated resolution, apparently planned occurrences turn out to be coincidences while apparently innocent ones turn out to be planned.

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Christophe Malavoy, and Nicole Garcia in *Pêril*, a Triumph Films release.

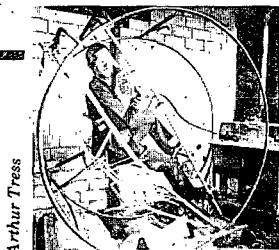
The resolution is something of a French existentialist joke. The young man has been manipulated into adultery, robbery, and even murder. He is clearly guilty of the first two, but not the last. Much loudly creaking plot machinery is required to force the viewer into regarding him as innocent of the murder he commits. The non-French viewer isn't sure just where the plot exaggera-

tions end and awkward movie-making begins.

With all its flaws, *Pêril* succeeds by preserving its national identity. Unlike other French mysteries of the past few years, it resists trying to imitate the American private eye or tough guy thriller. Even at the end it all remains somewhat perplexing. Yet this mystification proves to be intriguing rather than annoying. After all, the appeal of mystery often comes from the *not* knowing.

Not every movie that is made gets distributed. Some show up on pay television, others go straight into videotape stores. This seems to have been the case with **Perfect Strangers**, a fairly successful variation on the old theme of the child who witnesses a murder. (A recent example is the long-running hit *Witness*, in which an Amish boy sees the murder; our favorite is British director Carol Reed's 1949 *Fallen Idol*.) This time the child is three years old, and just learning to speak. The killer knows that the child saw him, but isn't sure whether or not he will be remembered and eventually identified. There are some good downtown New York City locations, a private eye with an accent, acting that leaves something to be desired, and a well-turned, surprise windup.

THE STORY THAT WON



The July Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Ivy Lee Berr of Canoga Park, California. Honorable mentions go to Tyson Blue of Dublin, Georgia; Joyce Dubisch of Sedro Woolley, Washington; Joe Scarlett of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; Don Shaffer of San Mateo, California; Gloria Cider of Oshkosh, Wisconsin; Carmia June Bower of Altamonte Springs, Florida; Warren J. Wightman of Fairport, New York; Mildred Barker of Stone Ridge, New York; Bill Cunningham of Aiken, South Carolina; and Shirley Lawrence Steele of Grinnell, Iowa.

ROLLS IN LIFE by Ivy Lee Berr

B-6

I had the perfect scheme. My friends sat up front where I could see their cards. There was no one to check up on me. We split the winnings. It was foolproof! Foolproof!

I-16

Someone's conscience started acting up. Turned us in. They only went to jail. But me . . . I worked for the church . . . I should have known better.

N-40

The judge devised the perfect punishment for me. Five hours a night for the next twenty years. Strapped in this contraption, spun around and around, stopping only to call out numbers and letters.

G-55

I pray for my jail cell, for my head to stop spinning.

O-72

Oh no! Here I go again . . . faster and faster . . . the room is spinning . . . I careen to a stop . . .

BINGO!

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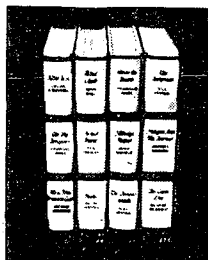
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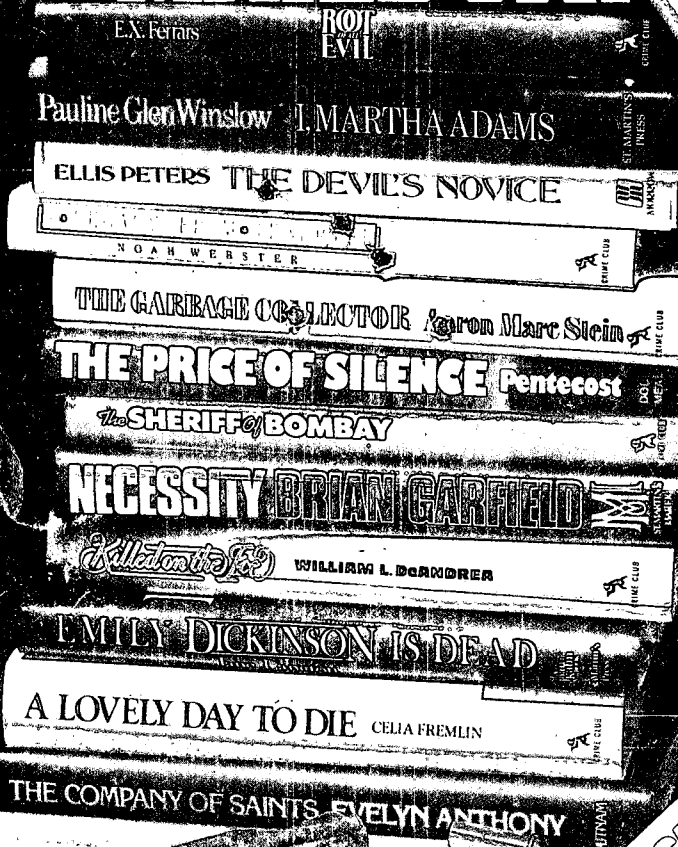


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